Chapter 4: Towards a Theory of Objectivity for Activist Research

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Introduction

Activists have a commitment to social change. They are not impartial in their purposes. When it comes to knowledge-producing activities, this chafes against our intuition that this sort of work should be done neutrally or at a distance. The worry is that objectivity is compromised. This chapter takes this worry seriously and presents the beginnings of a theory of objectivity that is especially geared towards social-activist research—OBFAR: objectivity for activist research. It uses the South African anti-apartheid activist Ruth First's work while she was on leave from Durham University in Mozambique as an example of a self-conscious effort to ensure the objectivity of her social-activist research. It is the work of a team of philosophers from Durham University's Centre for Humanities Engaging Science and Society project, 'Celebrating Ruth First', and from the University of California San Diego project 'Objectivity in Activist Research'.

The problem in brief

Activists committed to social change are not impartial in their purposes. Insofar as knowledge-producing activities are concerned it raises issues of this being undertaken "neutrally" or at "a distance". This is what Ben Geiger describes as the perceived tension between 'advocacy' and 'objectivity' (Geiger 2021: 788). Our special interest in this chapter is objectivity, since it relates to scholar-activists whose research topics coincide with the object of their activism. We call this concept "objectivity for activist research" or OBFAR. Amid the current "culture wars" and the resulting tension between information and social, political and cultural values, the stakes for making sense of the concept OBFAR are especially high.

"Objective" research involves some concern with "getting things right", that is, a commitment to

something like truth, accuracy, reality or factual correctness. Objectivity for activist research should also involve such a commitment, despite researchers' concerns to further the interests and values of the cause associated with their research. The concept of objectivity, even when applied to this kind of research, should capture something about the research's concern with truth/facts/reality. Any research project that finds some conclusion only to further the aims/values of a particular cause with no regard for truth/fact, clearly should not be counted as an objective one, even vis-à-vis that cause. This should, however, not be taken to mean that the primary goal of an objective research project is "the pursuit of truth"; these things need only be attended to along the way. Given the research purposes, what must be found and the intended use of the findings, concerns about objectivity will centre around whether the researchers have used the right methods and processes given those purposes. Objectivity requires due diligence to get this right. We can summarise this as: objectivity requires using the right methods to achieve the right—that is, accurate enough—results for the purposes to be served.

But there is more to think about with respect to purposes. You cannot simply take these as given. Those who commission research are often vague about exactly what research questions they would like to have answered, which is not surprising, since they are seldom sufficiently expert in the scientific details to know what might matter. For instance, suppose the aim is to reduce rural poverty in Britain and you are a poverty activist commissioned to design a measure to estimate its extent. There are notoriously a great many subtle decisions to be made in the design of a poverty measure that can matter to the results, the significance of which is hard for someone untrained in economics to grasp. Do you first count individuals or households? How do you count children? Old people living in a household? What about those living alone? When it comes to the measure itself, do you only want to count the number below a designated threshold, or do you want a depth of poverty measure? Is the threshold an absolute or a relative one? To answer these questions in a sensible way, you will need a far better sense of what the research purposes are than just "to reduce rural poverty". You will have to think carefully and in more detail about what they really are in the concrete – or what they should be. If you do not take due diligence to think this through, you are not making the kind of effort required to get your research methods and the results it produces right. You are failing in your duty to be objective. Objectivity demands that you find the right purposes for your research to serve.

Note too that the problem of identifying the right purposes does not go away if commissioners are explicit in their specifications. No matter how carefully one sets out a list of desiderata, much will still be unsaid. It will almost always be possible to do what is on the list, but in a way that clearly does not satisfy what was intended, even if the commissioners could not have articulated all those intentions explicitly themselves. You are not being sufficiently objective if you get taken up with what is explicit and

pay insufficient attention to all else that is presupposed implicitly. The distinction here is between the letter of the specification and the spirit of the specification. Consider, for example, Pierluigi Barrotta and Eleonora Montuschi's (2018) discussion of the Vajont dam disaster in the Dolomite Mountains in 1963 when a landslide into the reservoir behind the dam created a tsunami over the top of the dam that killed over a thousand people down the valley. Barrotta and Montuschi argue that the engineers focused too much on the purpose of building a dam that stands and not enough on the safety of the people down the valley in situations that could foreseeably occur, as with a big landslide. As a result, the engineers invested too little in researching landslides and made overly optimistic estimates about their likelihood. Their research met the specification to the letter, however, it did not do all that was required.[1]

It should not be supposed that the explicit purposes are sacrosanct. If your research uncovers suggestions that serving the explicit purposes might undermine other goals of the cause or do harm to those the cause cares about or to others, and you avert your gaze from those suggestions instead of giving them due consideration, again your research is not making sufficient effort to get it right. More generally, whenever research is to be used to affect the world, objectivity—taking due diligence to "get it right"—cannot be constrained just to doing your best to use the right methods and to get the right results that follow those methods. In these cases, there is a duty of care to do research that serves the right purposes. Since the primary reason for much social-activist research is to affect the world, this duty looms large there. Therefore, OBFAR requires using the right methods to achieve the right results for the right purposes. Of course, researchers are not expected to be perfect. Rather, what the duty of care for OBFAR demands is what could be expected of a reasonable person with reasonably appropriate skills making reasonable effort.

We have said our aim is to provide the beginnings of a theory of OBFAR. This differs from offering a definition or characterisation. That is because we think that characterisation without surrounding theory is of little use. The point of a theory is to tell you more about the feature in view—in our case OBFAR—so that you can devise ways to find out when it obtains and ways to encourage or prevent it in your own practice. What is more, you can come to an understanding of what you can do if you have it and what the advantages and disadvantages are of securing it. After some preliminaries in Part Two, we begin the serious work of this chapter in Section Three by exploring the arguments that social-activist research is by its very nature beset by the risk of bias: this is the criticism that it cannot be objective and, even if it can be, it is very unlikely to be. Thereafter, we lay out what our theory of OBFAR looks like so far. Currently, the theory has two major parts. First, in Section Four we identify several threats to objectivity

1 For more on objectivity, Vajont dam and duty of care see Cartwright et al. 2022.

that activist research may be especially open to, and second, in section five we describe five strategies—two social and three individual—that can help avert these threats. These are strategies that can contribute to objectivity in any kind of research, but that seem especially relevant to activist research.

What then of Ruth First and her research in Mozambique? We turn to this issue in Section Six. Ruth First was clearly deeply committed to ending apartheid in South Africa and to enabling socialist revolution in Southern Africa. Because of this, some critics have maintained that her work was biased (Santos 2012; see also remarks in First 1980 and First and De Bragança 1980), for the same reasons, we revisit this issue in Section Three. In response, other scholars and colleagues have offered lively and well-argued defences that it was not (De Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984; O'Laughlin 2014a, 2014b). What do we have to add to this discussion? In section three, we note that it is not possible to do research without risk of bias. It is like driving your car in a populated area. You cannot avoid the risk of an accident—a child may dash in front of you at any time or another driver may come ploughing into you from the side. You can, however, take steps to reduce the chances that these risks will result in harm by "defensive driving"—keeping your car in good condition, educating yourself about safe-driving techniques and developing skills in them, staying alert both to traffic conditions and your own state, anticipating hazards and avoiding risky manoeuvres. Research is the same. The risk of bias cannot be eliminated. However, steps can be taken to guard against harmful effects ensuing from it—like the five strategies we outline in Section Five. What we can add to the discussion of Ruth First's work in Mozambique is the observation that, though not under the descriptions we give, First made serious and painstaking efforts to deploy all five of the strategies that we identify to diminish the chances that the inevitable risk of bias would undermine the objectivity of the research. Her research is an admirable example of a job well done in this respect.

Section Two: Some preliminaries

To begin with, a quick note on the notion of activism is used here. Activism has at least two associated uses. One of them is narrower, denoting grassroots direct action towards a broadly left-wing political end. The labour movement, the Animal Liberation Front and the US Civil Rights movements are exemplars of such activism. The second is much broader: it encompasses any deliberate attempt to enact social, political and moral change. On this conception, not only are Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela and Greta Thunberg activists, but oil magnates, politicians and lobbyists are too. We shall assume the second, broader sense of activism in this paper. This is because, as we shall see, the mechanisms and worries extend to both definitions.

Second, our aims and methods are as follows. Given that the results of activist research are

intended to be used to do things in the world, activist researchers have a special duty of care to choose the right methods to produce accurate enough results for the right purposes. We are not trying to capture what "objectivity for activist research" really means or what it might be generally taken to mean. Instead, we aim to devise an account of objectivity that can be appropriately used in evaluating activist research. Hence, we are not doing a philosophical analysis of a concept but rather we are conceptual engineering. Let us expand. Philosophers spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to accurately understand and apply complicated concepts. We ask questions of the kind, "What is X?" where X is some weighty, important concept—in our case, objectivity. In this sketch, philosophical research is largely descriptive; success depends on accurately describing concepts that are in some sense "out there" in the world and identifying when we can and cannot accurately apply them. A recent movement, surrounding the use of conceptual engineering as a philosophical method, suggests that we should be dissatisfied with our progress in these pursuits. Even for our most fundamental concepts such as truth or justice—there are multiple and varied proposals for how to make sense of them, and very little (if any) consensus as to which are the most accurate and in which contexts they are most appropriately used.

Conceptual engineers offer both an explanation for and a solution to this lack of progress. By way of diagnosis, conceptual engineering suggests that our lack of clarity and consensus over how we should accurately characterise and use our concepts stems from defects with the concepts themselves or with our conceptual scheme more broadly. The solution, conceptual engineers tell us, is that we need not make do with our existing, defective conceptual tools. Instead, we can fix those that are defective and do away with those that are broken beyond repair. We can even develop entirely new concepts when we find that our conceptual scheme does not equip us with the tools needed to perform specific tasks. Rather than struggle to understand our old concepts, conceptual engineers say we should be working to improve our conceptual scheme by repairing or replacing old concepts and developing new ones so that we will be equipped with the right concepts for the purposes at hand.

Our work on a theory of objectivity for activist research is largely in this spirit. Objectivity is an important evaluative concept which allows us to signal a variety of virtues about our knowledge-producing endeavours. We have identified a particular kind of research—namely, activist research—that the existing concept seems ill-equipped to handle. Given that the results of activist research are intended to be used to do things in the world, activist researchers have a special duty of care to choose the right methods to produce accurate enough results for the right purposes. OBFAR makes demands over and above those made by objectivity in non-activist research settings. Rather than getting embroiled in discussions about what the concept of objectivity is supposed to mean in various contexts, we aim to

lay the groundwork for a theory that describes a new concept, one especially fitted for activist research. In this vein, this chapter does not attempt to offer a precise explication of our OBFAR concept, it begins instead by drawing the rough boundaries of the concept (namely, as noted, that OBFAR requires taking reasonable care to use the right methods to achieve the right results for the right purposes). In Sections Four and Five, we work to clarify the concept and its appropriate usage further by adumbrating some of the special kinds of risks objectivity is open to in activist research and developing a set of strategies to reduce the chances that these risks will undermine objectivity.

Third, we leave open the question of where the burden for enacting objectivity should fall. In many cases, it seems a heavy burden to place on an individual researcher who may not be well placed to think through all the issues involved. In this case, it is important to ensure that there are institutional and structural aids in place to support the pursuit of objectivity. We should, however, also note that there is a responsibility on individual researchers to do their best to be objective. Some people may just not be very able at this, for this reason, they should refrain from taking on the research or ensure that they do it with others more knowledgeable.

Fourth, there has recently been a spate of work trying to define objectivity, in the manner of the "What is X?" philosophising described above. We think these characterisations can, without too much distortion, be grouped under three main headings: those who want objective research to be value-free, those who want it to be free of judgement (that is, not "subjective") and those who want it to "get it right". It will be clear by now that our account is for a concept that falls in the third category. That is because we think the other two are generally not possible for activist research. If you want research that is value- and judgement-free, do not look to activist research. However, be careful what you wish for. More recent work in science studies argues that little in science can be objective in either of these senses.[2] Hence, you may be in danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

More radical research has even suggested that there is no such thing as objective research in the first place. The criticisms that there is no such thing as objective activist research are multifarious and often confused, which is not to say that all concerns about objectivity are misguided. However, the conclusion that objectivity is impossible in activist research goes well beyond what those arguments support (except insofar as one is willing to conclude that real objectivity is impossible in research tout court). Critiques that attack the possibility of objective activist research do so on at least four separate grounds that tend

2 Whilst it used to be thought that science was value-free (Ackerman 1980; Brecht 1959; Friedman 1982; Habermas 1971; Popper 1945; Root 1999; Weber 1949;), since the beginning of the twenty-first century it has been widely accepted amongst philosophers of science that science is in fact value-laden (see Agazzi and Minazzi 2008; Elliot 2011; Forge 2009; Gonzalez 2013; Kincaid et al. 2007; Lacey 2002; Lekka-Kowalik 2010; Machamer and Wolters 2004).

to be conflated together:

1. that the sharp dichotomy between facts and values does not stand up to rigorous analytical scrutiny (Gross 1965: 385) and further, that value-neutrality is impossible (Habermas 1971: 331);
2. that claims of apolitical scholarship are ideological sleights of hand, the 'myth' of writing objectively being promoted on behalf of the institutions with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo (Drew and Taylor 2014: 158.; see also Lather 1986, 1992) and, further, that it is the responsibility of academics to be politically engaged (Chomsky 1996);
3. that all knowledge is positioned, which comes from both feminists (Harding 1987; Smith 1987; Stanley and Wise 1993) and poststructuralists (Peters and Burbules 2004); and
4. that appeals to objectivity preclude or obfuscate considerations regarding the need to be attentive to the voice of those researched (Drew and Taylor 2014: 160).

However, the way we are using the term "objectivity"—as OBFAR—differs from the notion under attack by these opponents. OBFAR, by virtue of the fact that it is to be conceptually engineered for activist research, is precisely aligned with these criticisms, consisting of those very features that are normally found to be in opposition to the idea of objectivity. OBFAR is a characteristic of research that is political, value-laden, positioned and specifically attentive to its research subjects, and this characteristic is obtained when that research is conducted objectively—that is, when it gets it right despite these special challenges. In this way, we aim for our conception of OBFAR to absorb the criticisms against other notions of objectivity, and we deem one of its strengths to be that it possesses those virtues which are bemoaned as lacking in competing notions.

Fifth, we will discuss a very brief introduction to the period of Ruth First's work. First arrived at Durham University in 1973, having come to Britain from South Africa after being imprisoned and then exiled in 1964 by the apartheid government for her activism. She joined the sociology department where her erudition and tenacious spirit of enquiry left a lasting impression on her students and colleagues. After four years at Durham, First travelled to Mozambique on leave where she led a research project on migrant labour. One year later she was appointed research director of the newly formed *Centro de Estudos Africanos* (Centre of African Studies) (CEA) at Eduardo Mondlane University. First had long been away from southern Africa and was keen to re-immerse herself in the politics of the region. In this chapter we consider the relationship between First, the CEA and the nascent FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de*

Moçambique (Liberation Front of Mozambique) government alongside debates about the objectivity of activist research.

Whilst at the CEA, Ruth First insisted on training Mozambican students and government cadres in the methods of critical inquiry and research. In doing so, she hoped 'to make social research an acceptable step in the formulation and implementation of policy' (Centre of African Studies 1982: 37). According to the director of the CEA, Antonio de Bragança and her former colleague Bridget O'Laughlin, First believed that the academic work she was to do in Mozambique would not only support the socialist transition there, but also play a direct role in undermining the apartheid government in South Africa (De Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984). First's main research project at the CEA was "The Mozambican Miner", a seven-month study that sought to understand the significance of migrant labour to the Mozambican economy. By the end of the project, First and the CEA hoped to advise the FRELIMO government on how they might disengage from this predatory labour practice that benefited the South African economy to the detriment of Mozambique's. As we have noted, many academics would consider a union like this between research and activism to be bound to undermine objectivity. We will now proceed to review some of their reasons.

Section Three: Activism and objective research

The sceptical view

The idea that activist research cannot be objective is commonly expressed, however, it is difficult to find detailed arguments for this thesis in print. Although it certainly is informed by the view-from-nowhere—the value-free conception of objectivity mentioned above—the specific moves in the argument made are, commonly, merely alluded to rather than explicated. In this section, we will consider some of the explicit discussions of the issue—starting with Bas van der Vossen's (2015) work on activism in political philosophy before turning to Tommy J. Curry's work (2017). Our focus will be on clarifying their charges that activist research involves additional barriers to "getting it right", before raising some hesitations with the extent to which these barriers to objectivity exclusively apply to activist research. Despite our responses, in the sections following this one, we take the sceptics' worries seriously and use them to form the basis of our conceptual development and clarification of OBFAR.

Van der Vossen (2015, 2020) claims that political philosophers should not be activists, since this violates a professional duty. He argues that if someone assumes a certain role, they thereby shoulder a professional duty to avoid anything that is likely to make them worse at performing that role. For instance,

it is wrong for a surgeon to go out drinking the night prior to a complex operation. Likewise, professional inquirers, such as scientists and philosophers, have a duty to abstain from habits of thought, cognitive dispositions etcetera that make them worse reasoners and therefore, less likely to get it right (Van der Vossen 2015, 2020). Van der Vossen argues that partaking in activism makes inquirers more prone to various types of cognitive biases. Citing research from behavioural economics and social psychology, the author identifies several effects that political engagement seems to have on reasoning. Most of these focus on the strength of an in-group self-identification (for example, how strongly one identifies oneself as a Democrat or Republican) and its effect on evaluation of policy.

Generally, the studies that Van der Vossen cite point towards a strong correlation between political engagement and cognitive partisanship—a phenomenon where outcomes, policies etcetera are judged based on whether it is enacted by a member of one's broad political group. For instance, one study that Van der Vossen cites claims to show that conservatives are surprisingly prone to support generous welfare policies if proposed by Republicans, and similarly for Liberals when Democrats support austere welfare measures (Van der Vossen 2015: 1051). The conclusion of this study is that our evaluation of certain programmes, policies and outcomes are heavily influenced by our political "tribe" membership—we tend to be much more lenient to those who share our tribe and much more critical of those who are opposed to it, even in cases where a friend and a foe are proposing the same thing.

Additionally, Van der Vossen claims that these studies suggest that the more politically engaged one is, the more prone one is to make these errors. In short, scholars who engage in activism become more prone to biases like in-group bias and confirmation bias. This causes inquirers to negate large swathes of information that does not mesh well with their favoured hypothesis or to interpret information in a manner that flatters their favoured hypothesis (Van der Vossen 2015). Being predictably more prone to these biases by engaging in activism, they become worse at accurately processing and correctly searching for information, supplying principled justifications for their inferences, etcetera: they fail to be sufficiently objective. Political philosophers have a professional duty to uncover the truth about politics, and by committing themselves to research on behalf of political causes, they put themselves at risk of biassing their inquiry to the detriment of the ability of their research to find the truth. This conflicts with their professional duties. Van der Vossen claims this goes against what he calls the 'Principle of Responsible Professionalism', which states that people engaged in a profession have a prima facie duty to not indulge in habits, activities etcetera that predictably make them worse at their jobs (Van der Vossen 2015: 1047). Political philosophers thus, betray their professional commitments by undertaking activist research. Therefore, activist scholars betray their professional responsibilities, as Van der Vossen (2015) accounts.

While Van der Vossen's arguments specifically target political philosophers, the same arguments can

be extended to activist research more broadly. Scientists and other researchers are humans, after all, and likely to display these biases too. A researcher could, for instance, downplay the importance of evidence that runs contrary to those that support their favoured cause or be excessively accommodating of weak evidence in support. Going beyond Van der Vossen, the threat of bias can be even worse. Van der Vossen argues that activist commitments produce biases that threaten the objectivity of the research—which is our topic here. Curry (2017) criticises intersectional feminist researchers and scholars not only for failing at objectivity: he also claims that these kinds of activist theoretical and methodological commitments can perpetuate and solidify concepts and stereotypes that in turn, produce significant harm to the communities labelled. This can happen if, as Curry argues, the research smuggles in preconceived notions of gender, society and power which then not only skew results, but solidify harmful concepts that Curry calls 'stereotypes and antisocial caricatures' (2017: 169). For instance, the research may assume a social hierarchy or distribution of power that obscures unique ways in which individuals who lie at the intersection of these categories can be victimised or marginalised.

Curry's objections extend Van der Vossen's concerns about activist research: if activist research has a distinct agenda in mind when formulating research questions or conducting substantive research, then not only can researchers produce incorrect results from their research, they can further reproduce and solidify harmful theoretical frameworks. One of the targets of Curry's attack is feminist-based research. He claims that researchers who embrace a feminist ideology run the risk of letting their results be driven primarily by feminist concerns, overlooking the experience of other marginalised communities, like those of Black males. Their experiences are conceived through a feminist lens rather than on their own terms (Curry 2017).

Issues with the sceptical accounts

While Van der Vossen and Curry's arguments are intuitively plausible, they suffer from several significant drawbacks—at least when applied to activist research. The first is that the type of risk-taking in scientific research that Van der Vossen abhors seems to be part and parcel of scientific practice, even that conducted from the ivory tower. Indeed, risking confirmation bias, groupthink and careless adoption of background assumptions and methods to yield desired results is far from absent in non-activist research. The history of science has plenty of cases where respected contributors to their fields were unwilling to cave in to convincing challenges to their theories and models or fell victim to the sorts of biases that Van der Vossen is worried about (Curry 2017; Van der Vossen 2020).

Let us look at some examples. Robert Millikan, in his research on deep-space radiation in the 1920s

and 1930s, kept trying to vindicate his theories about cosmic rays and atoms long after significant issues with his favoured hypotheses were presented and collaborators had moved on, in part due to a desire to cling to a theory that vindicated his cosmological and theological beliefs (Galison 1987: Chapter 3). Albert Einstein's and Wander Johannes de Haas's determination of the gyromagnetic ratio of the electron was influenced by background expectations that led Einstein and De Haas to determine the g-factor to roughly 1, which was in line with their theoretical expectations. Another physicist, Samuel J. Barnett, attempted to replicate Einstein and De Haas's results and obtained a g-factor closer to 2, which is the accepted value today. However, when he learned of Einstein and de Haas's experiments being 'obviously influenced by Einstein's theory and experiment' (Galison 1987: 67), Barnett performed a new set of experiments that put the g-factor between 1.1 and 1.4 (Galison 1987: Chapter 2). Physicist and historian Monwhea Jeng (2006) argues that Barnett's decision, and later research on the subject, was likely influenced by the bandwagon effect. This is only a small selection of the many episodes from the history of science where ivory tower research has been significantly influenced by bias.

Episodes such as these suggest that the same effects that Van der Vossen worries commonly affect activist research, also appear in one of the most successful and influential bastions of the ivory tower—physics. Indeed, every research project comes with background assumptions, desiderata, favoured methods and priorities that can potentially bias researchers and their results. There are also discipline-wide biases at work—the so-called "received wisdom". As such, the risk of bias is in some way always present. Therefore, engaging in ivory tower science presents similar risks. We do not mean to suggest that scientific inquiry is, therefore, not objective enough to pursue. Much of the social organisation of science is designed to keep the harmful effects of bias in check, both in the ivory tower and in activist research. Consider an analogy with the institutional arrangement of criminal procedures in adversarial legal systems. The defence and the prosecution are both assumed to be biased towards their own side. If a judge is biased, the verdict can be tried at a court of appeal or be kept in check by the jury, or there may be a panel of judges in higher courts, etcetera. Checks and balances and other institutional designs work to keep such biases in check, so that the harms caused by vicious or inattentive agents within them are minimised. Any system that relies on the raw virtue of its members is ripe for exploitation. It would be irresponsible of any public institution to rely entirely on the innate incorruptibility and competence of its politicians, judges and civil servants. Venues for accountability and insight are a must, lest corruption and arbitrary use of power set in. This is why liberal democracies often have a "separation of powers" of the core branches of government, so that they can balance and check each other.

The same holds for the ivory tower. Arrangements such as these are present in science as well. Peer review, access to raw data and stringent epistemic requirements for confirmation exist in part to weed

out such biases, be they rooted in political partisanship or scientists clinging to pet theories. We shall list some safeguards against these in Section Five. These mechanisms and their function are, of course, slightly idealised and surely do not catch all instances of biased research. Corruption is not absent from the ivory tower, just as it is not absent in parliaments and legal systems, even those with the most rigorous checks and balances. However, the risk is accepted in the case of ivory tower research and there are mechanisms in place to keep these in check. Thus, singling out activist research in particular, as Van der Vossen does, seems unjustified. Thus, we deny that introducing risk in this context is necessarily unethical. It is a necessary part of scientific research. If scientists can be biased by working together in laboratories or under shared theoretical frameworks and that is acceptable in the ivory tower, then the same ought to be acceptable for activist researchers.

Of course, a sceptic might reply that while the biases that the ivory tower suffers may be unavoidable, activist research is not. Activist research has the same sources of bias as the ivory tower and adds another risk factor by being explicitly charged with furthering the concerns of a specific cause. To borrow Van der Vossen's (2015: 1047) example, suppose that Sam the surgeon fails in his professional duties by not getting enough sleep before a surgery. Perhaps the urgency of many of his surgeries leaves him sleep deprived and this is an inevitable part of his job. This is regrettable, but ultimately a necessity to save lives. This, however, does not excuse Sam showing up hungover to the surgery—drinking adds an unnecessary risk. Analogously, we can choose to engage in research that does not have this additional and avoidable source of risk. Thus, the sceptic argues, we ought to abstain from engaging in activist research since abstaining from it takes another risk of bias out of the equation.

To answer this charge, it is worth noting that activist research need not make researchers worse at finding the truth, at least tout court. This is because there are mechanisms that not only can keep risks to objective research at bay, but can make activist research more likely to achieve the epistemically correct outcome. In other words, working with an activist goal may promote objectivity. This addresses any worries about introducing risks one could choose not to take. In some cases, by allowing a research programme to pursue activist aims, the findings qua activist research could turn out to be more objective, such that not taking a stance on political and social issues would make the outcome worse. Hence, there are cases where taking such risks is not only acceptable, but desirable. Below, we shall list some of the reasons for thinking overt adherence to a specific cause can produce better research:

First, as Rico Hauswald (2021) points out, activists may well be alert to research topics and questions that are not recognised in mainstream research. Philip Kitcher (2001, 2011) has argued that we need "well-ordered science", by which he means science that is aligned with society's democratic aims. Surely biomedical research as a whole is not well ordered, given that only a small portion of all biomedical

expenditure is spent on studying disease affecting the world's poorest people. For instance, despite jointly making up 21 per cent of the global disease burden in 2003, malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea and tuberculosis received only 0.31 per cent of the money available globally for health research (Reiss and Kitcher 2009: 264). Perhaps being "well-ordered" is not the same as being "objective" in many senses of objectivity, however, we think the two are close together in cases where there is a duty of care to "get it right", as in the case of biomedical research, which generally has a predictably high chance of being used to affect things in the real world.

Second, the fact that the welfare of people or things they care about is at stake may well make activist researchers take special care and effort to get their results and purposes right. For instance, in his defence of activist research, Charles Hale notes the increased stakes when conducting activist research: 'It is the difference between the momentary sting of critique from fellow colleagues, and the grave responsibility of having a direct and demonstrable impact on the lives of people and on a given political process' (Hale 2001: 15). Or, as Nathan Geffen (2010: 53) describes his work as a member of the South African HIV/AIDS organisation, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC): 'There was a sense of desperation behind our eagerness to learn: nearly every week a member of TAC or someone close to our members died. We needed to be well informed not just for our intellectual stimulation, but because the lives of our members were at risk'. Similarly, socio-cultural anthropologist Christopher Anthony Loperena explains that the research he was engaged in on indigenous land rights and commerce in Triunfo de la Cruz forced him to 'understand the high stakes and political salience of the research [he] was conducting' (Loperena 2016: 333). In addition, activist researchers are incentivised to care about potential blemishes to a cause's reputation if the research turns out to be poorly conducted or a victim to the types of pitfalls discussed in Section Four. As their research guides and justifies a given cause, finding and spreading spurious results can do significant damage to the cause's legitimacy.

For a third view, we can look to Sandra Harding's (2015) version of standpoint epistemology and the strong objectivity that it promises will come with it. Standpoint epistemologists claim that the standpoints of marginalised groups are less prone to bias than those of non-marginalised groups. The dominant groups' worldview, including its conceptual scheme and the questions deemed worth investigating, is significantly shaped by the goals and aims it has, which generally exclude the aims, conceptual schemes and methods that marginalised groups have and rely on. Because they grow up and live in societies catered to the perspectives of dominant groups, marginalised groups are well-acquainted with them. However, since they also inhabit their own, marginalised perspectives—their standpoints—they have access to marginalised perspectives as well, in a way that members of a dominant class do not. Harding argues that some scientific inquiry is biased due to an unchecked vicious reliance on background

assumptions embraced by dominant social groups. Harding's case studies focus on androcentric values and background assumptions (Harding 2015: 26–29). She argues, for instance, that medicine used to treat women's bodies as identical to those of males except for a few features such as average height and reproductive systems (Harding 2015: 26–29).

The claim that marginalised standpoints are neglected in political decision-making and other forms of representation is common in fields that accommodate activist research, anthropology being a noteworthy example. In these fields, research is often conducted specifically to bring marginalised people, issues and agendas to the fore, because they are not given their due attention by dominant modes of inquiry. The claim here is not that the activist researchers themselves necessarily occupy marginalised roles. Ruth First, for instance, occupied a very privileged position, both racially as a White person in apartheid South Africa and socio-economically. Rather, the point is that activist researchers are more likely to attend to the issues and concerns of the marginalised during their activism. Activist research can, therefore, rectify failures of objectivity by challenging dominant assumptions and ideology, casting light on issues previously not given due attention.

We see this explicitly in Ruth First's academic work. In the first editorial of the *Review of African Political Economy* (RoAPE), a publication of which Ruth First was a founding member, the editors describe their purposes as providing a "counterweight" to orthodox African political economy at the time. Mainstream research was largely conducted outside of Africa and RoAPE's editorial board and argued that this provided an incomplete picture of the continent. On their account, researchers were unable to pick out the most salient topics of inquiry, resulting in research projects wide-off the mark. The response of the RoAPE editorial board, all of whom had spent substantial time working on the African continent, was to set up their own journal that could draw more Africans into the academic conversation (RoAPE 1974). Notably, they were not only concerned with drawing Africans into the debate, they were also worried about objectivity (even though they used different language to describe this). In the proposal for the new journal, they described the aim as being: 'a need ... for a *cold hard look* at the internal structures and the external forces ... for a more thorough understanding of the historical dynamics and the contemporary nature of African domination by imperialism and the prospects for total liberation' (Allen et al 1973). There will be more discussion on the case of Ruth First's sociological work in Section Six of this chapter.

Returning to the sceptical view, the tight connection between activist research and bias does not support the conclusion that activist research predictably increases the net-risk of bias. Whether it is a bias-promoting factor is a case-by-case matter. Nevertheless, even if activist research can play an objectivity-promoting role, we would not wish to allow the biases that might naturally come with it to threaten using the right methods to achieve the right results for the right purposes. The fact that this can

readily happen in the rest of science is also not a good enough reason to allow it for activist research. That is why we have made efforts to compile a catalogue of specific threats that being committed to the interest of a cause—like a political movement or a pharmaceutical or an oil company—might raise. We turn to this next.

Section Four: Special threats to OBFAR

We want to begin by making it clear that in this section we are not talking about outright violations of research ethics, like deliberately "cooking the books" or misinterpreting your data, using a method that you think will favour the results you would like to find even though it is not appropriate to the subject, misreporting results and the like. This kind of behaviour is not to be condemned because it undermines objectivity, but rather because it is sheer dishonesty.

There are of course many motives for dishonesty in any kind of research and many motives to be honest. Is there likely to be more dishonesty among activist researchers? We know that there have been well-known cases which have been accused of bordering on it, like pharmaceutical companies designing trials with very specific treatment regimes and very carefully crafted descriptions of the outcome that their other research suggests are the most likely procedures to produce positive results. This happens even though the regimes may be difficult to reproduce in real use and the very specifically crafted outcomes may bear only a superficial connection to outcomes of real concern. However, as noted in Section Three (Issues with sceptical accounts), there can be special incentives to be fastidious in activist research, both because researchers care about getting it right for the cause they believe in and because of the fear of reputational damage to the cause if mistakes or dishonesties are exposed. Naturally, outright dishonesty is to be avoided in any kind of research and there are usually standards and sanctions in place to discourage it no matter the topic.

As we noted in the second part of Section Three, the worries raised by objectors like those discussed in the first part of Section Three (The sceptical view) are not about outright deliberate dishonesty. They are rather about risks created by unconscious or half-conscious leanings, assumptions, habits and wishes. These are less amenable to direct policing and they are what we concentrate on here—things that can be broadly gathered under the umbrella "ostrich effect": avoiding recognising unpleasantries. Because of their activist commitments, activists may be prone to not notice suggestions that arise while planning or conducting research that there might be information indicating unpleasant conclusions for their cause its advocates or the course of actions favoured by it or, from among all acceptable methods for pursuing the research, be prone to choose ones that are less likely to turn up such unpleasantries.

We allow that the risk of "putting your head in the sand so you don't see impending troubles" will be a live one for much activist research. Therefore, we take it to be part of the researchers' duty of care to be alert to this risk and make special efforts to keep it from undermining the objectivity of their work. Here we compile a list of unpleasantries we have identified where the ostrich effect may intrude into activist research, as a guide for what to watch out for.

To avoid the ostrich effect, we recommend activist researchers be especially alert to suggestions that there might be evidence suggesting that:

1. The results are being too driven by the ideology of the cause and are not sufficiently responsive to the facts. This is the primary charge levelled against Ruth First's work in Mozambique, which we discuss in Section Six, where we also discuss the strategies she took to avoid dangers from this and other risks to objectivity.
2. Conclusions are being exaggerated to encourage impact. Consider a group of activist researchers who repeatedly fail to influence their own movement or the wider world in the way that their research suggests best. At what point and to what extent will they be inclined to change their research practices or change the way they present their results to increase their chances of having an impact on a cause which is dear to them?
3. The research assumptions/methods are based on theories and empirical analyses that are incomplete or erroneous. As we have noted, theory, method and background assumptions necessarily enter empirical research at some stage and it is all too easy for one or more of these to be incorrect or wrongfully applied. For example, if you base your analysis on a theory that assumes that the actors in the community under study are concerned about the well-being of others and are cooperative and this turns out to be false, your research results are likely to turn out to be incorrect. Of course, you cannot be expected to investigate every assumption and theory that your research relies on, some aspects must be taken as a given for research to proceed and others dealt with through a series of caveats. However, matters are different when there are reasons to think that a theory/method/interpretation you make use of might be creating incorrect results. In that case, your research has failed in its duty to be objective if a reasonable person with appropriate training and skills exerting due diligence in that situation could be expected to take note of these reasons, but failed to do so. This is analogous to the case in the natural sciences, where scientists must accept their background theories, assumptions and equipment set-up for experimentation to

proceed. However, if they have reason to believe that something has gone wrong—like an anomalous finding—they are expected to go back and check on things. In chemistry, for example, this might involve checking the equipment used (such as reaction vessels, the inert gas supply or the hotplate used to heat the vessel) and checking the reagents (are they out-of-date or contaminated?). Similarly, in social research, if there is reason to suspect something has gone wrong, the researcher must go back and check their set up. In the social sphere, however, this will involve checking methods and social assumptions, rather than whether the beakers are clean and the chemicals are within their expiry dates.

4. A favoured course of action, though it might succeed in its immediate aims, might (a) have harmful side effects, or (b) not after all serve the ultimate aims of the cause or its overall benefit or (c) both. Campaigns, policies and similar efforts can be misguided. A feature thought desirable or conducive to achieving the goals of the cause may turn out not to be very helpful or be counterproductive to its ultimate goals. For instance, suppose you undertake research on banning nitrate salts because the cause you work for thinks such a ban will reduce cancer rates, because lowering cancer is conducive to its ultimate aim of better health. But suppose there is evidence to suggest that the ban will cause an uptick in botulism that harms more people than nitrate-derived cancer would. You are not being genuinely objective in your research if you fail to take notice of this evidence and act on it as far as is practicable in the circumstances.
5. The scope of the research ignores other groups or causes that might be affected. Consider, for instance, a campaign in which an underrepresented group fights the government about an issue which affects a second, smaller or less-represented group, where the first group's demands would make the second group worse off. Land use in rural Sweden seems a case in point, where Sami legal institutions called Samebyar are used to dictate and represent land use for reindeer herding, which is an exclusive right for these institutions. Samebyar hold exclusive control over land usage over the areas under their purview, motivated by a desire to protect their land from mining industry, forestry etcetera imposed by the Swedish majority group which can harm herding profits. However, given the large amount of influence the Samebyar have, and since they are controlled by herders only, Sami people who work in less lucrative fields like fishing and hunting are often locked out from working inland under the purview of Samebyar. This leads to Sami fishermen and hunters being unable to work because

the scope of Sami rights to govern their land are restricted to institutions that pursue herding, and efforts that aim to increase the political standing of Sami people might be inadvertently harming Sami people who are not in the herding profession (Amft 2000; Blomkvist 2019).

6. A course of action favoured by the cause or a claim it holds dear may be mistaken. For instance, suppose you are a union-affiliated researcher whose research has turned up evidence suggesting that a company's highly unpopular decision that has caused a strike turned out to be reasonable or even necessary for the company to stay afloat, contrary to what the striking union members believe. OBFAR demands that you not ignore this inconvenient evidence nor overplay contrary evidence that confirms the favoured hypothesis.
7. The research itself will put a burden on some other group or cause. This is a problem much in view nowadays, especially in both medical and anthropological research. Researchers often go into a community, gain the knowledge that they want and leave without creating knowledge or benefits that are useful to the community on which the research is conducted, in essence using them as means and not ends in themselves. A common example of this is developing a drug using data from a study population, with the drug that is produced from the research being too expensive for the study population to buy. Your research design is not genuinely objective if you simply avert your gaze from this unpleasantry rather than adjusting the design to serve the studied community as well or trying to develop a different design without this drawback. Researchers in transcultural social sciences are increasingly aware of these risks and are working on strategies to do better (Kouritzin and Nakagawa 2018).
8. The cause, its priorities, its aims, its advocates or those it aims to serve are not as they seem, and not so deserving. The notorious behaviour of members of the UK government with respect to observing the Covid restrictions which the government had imposed on everyone is a good example here. A pro-government investigative journalist or a pro-government think-tank researcher may easily have been slower to notice the evidence of the violations by the prime minister and others—they are not so virtuous as they seemed to be (and ought to have been!)—than would be an anti-government researcher.

Also, noble movements can get hijacked by those with less noble motives and subtly bend the activities

of the movement to benefit themselves. These can include research activities like setting research questions and research agenda. There are, for instance, several notorious cases of hijacking of Christian charity by church leaders for their own use, as in the Singapore City Harvest church scandal where church founder Kong Hee was found guilty of misappropriating some S$50 million of church funds with the help of five key church leaders. Approximately S$24 million was invested in sham bonds to bankroll the pop-music career of Hee's wife. A strong church supporter employed to carry out research on how to increase church attendance may be slow to notice such small signs. Or, once the idea has emerged, they may feel outraged at the thought it might be happening and overestimate the evidence to that effect.

Other cases of well-intentioned research being hijacked can be found in development aid. Here, intermediaries—those working between aid organisations and communities—have incentives to not improve the situation on the ground too much because then they will be out of a job. Therefore, they might pass on subtly incorrect information to the organisation's researchers. This can corrupt the research questions and outcomes, and researchers may be slow to notice the problem because of their optimistic view of the programme and those who are receiving it.

Section Five: Five strategies to prevent the risks turning into harms

Here we identify five strategies that can help secure OBFAR. We adopt this approach (rather than, for example, listing precise conditions that activist research must meet for it to be counted as objective) for two reasons. First, as the examples we have looked at throughout this paper suggest, instances of activist research are diverse and all look very different. That we could produce such a list of conditions that would be applicable and instructive for all these contexts seems unlikely. Second, even if we were successful in producing such a list, it is not clear that it would be helpful for actually thinking about activist research on the ground. At least part of our aim in engineering OBFAR stems from our concern with helping those involved in doing and evaluating activist research. Providing activist researchers with a list of objectivity conditions for their research with no practical instruction as to how to meet these conditions seems unconstructive. Therefore, instead we conceptually engineer OBFAR by way of practical advice to activist researchers. The extent to which some research programmes follow these strategies can also be used as a measure for those interested in evaluating that programme's success in securing OBFAR.

Though our five strategies are not entirely distinct, we deem it a good idea to highlight each separately to get as much as we can in clear view. All five strategies are already familiar in research literature, however, we think they can be particularly helpful in ameliorating the kinds of threats outlined in our

catalogue in Section Four. The first two have to do with community norms and structure, the next three with the behaviour of individuals. Being able to identify "best practice" makes it easier to recognise when there are "red flags" associated with specific pieces of research (see, for instance, examples from Oreskes and Conway (2010)).

Foster pluralism of viewpoints and methods in the broader and narrower research communities

Much criticism has been levelled against various academic fields that are openly activist for being intellectually homogenous. This includes accusations against so-called "grievance studies", that is, fields such as ethnic studies and women's studies that openly advance left-leaning causes. Critics of these fields argue that they select strongly left-leaning scholarship, utilising methods that are prone to the type of confirmation biases Van der Vossen worries about (Lagerspetz 2021) or are over-reliant on qualitative methods with the suggestion that qualitative methods are never sufficiently rigorous (Bright et al. 2016). Similarly, evolutionary psychologists have come under scrutiny for (a) pursuing research that implicitly seeks to bolster a conservative agenda and (b) setting up alternative journals without standards commonly used in mainstream journals (for example, allowing the journal's editors to publish in the very same journal and allowing review by unqualified reviewers) (Carl et al. 2018). The argument here is that the fields in which activist research is performed, overtly or covertly, are composed of individuals and groupings with very similar perspectives, methods and ideologies. The concern is multi-layered. Part of the problem is that if everyone in a research community is similarly minded, this will restrict what gets viewed as a legitimate academic problem worthy of inquiry. It is, however, also a problem of methods—if activists are more prone to use specific methods, such as participatory action methods, this provides fewer intellectual tools for inquiry. Indeed, Hauswald (2021) acknowledges that the problem is not necessarily with the potential biases of activist researchers, but rather the overrepresentation of activists with the same activist affiliations within a single field. This is not a very radical call for action. At this point, it is not a call demanding interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research; it is restricted to the point that, as with all research, activist or not, all due precautions must be taken to offset the dangers posed by too much similarity of viewpoint and method.

According to Helen Longino's highly influential work on the community sources of objectivity, while venues for transformative criticism from alternative and sufficiently different scientific communities exist, scientific inquiry can be objective—or rather, for Longino, this is all we could mean by 'objective' (Longino 1990: Chapter 4). Longino's account of objectivity requires there to be avenues for critical

engagement from alternative points of view (1990: Chapter 4). Similarly, Hasok Chang's doctrine of interactive pluralism defends theoretical diversity as a desirable goal on the grounds that having several different interacting and competing systems of practice engenders various benefits that arise from these interactions (Chang 2012: Chapter 4).

We agree that in conjunction with accusations of not engaging significantly with other fields that offer the type of multi-perspectival criticism Longino calls for, activist research runs the risk of becoming immune to critical engagement from sources outside a single research programme. This means that trying to maintain perspectival and axiological heterogeneity is crucial. Of course, homogenous research programmes do not preclude good science, nor does heterogeneity ensure it. If all the systems of practice on offer are inadequate, no amount of cross-paradigmatic cooperation is going to wield good enough results. A robust method or vetting process can help make up for these shortcomings.

Activist causes, however, do not always have the luxury of waiting for such interactions between different research programmes to kick in. The issues activists attempt to address are often time sensitive. If an activist researcher takes the phenomenon they are studying as harmful or unjust, then ending it as quickly as possible becomes paramount. Communication across systems of practice or disciplines are seldom quick (Fam and O'Rourke 2021). Getting two different systems of practice to successfully communicate is not trivial, hence, transformative criticism from other research communities might not be available to all activist researchers, given the typical time limitations placed on their work. This makes it important for an activist research programme to try to achieve as much diversity of method and viewpoint within the research group itself.

Activist researchers can foster objectivity by cultivating a pluralistic approach to their research programme, aims and methods, bringing in as many as possible to subject themselves to transformative critique. This is something we will see illustrated in Ruth First's research programme about the Mozambique miners, where self-conscious attention was paid to who joined the research group and how they were trained and to the kinds of interactions and reviews of methods and results undertaken internally. This is also seen in First's work in the establishment of RoAPE (discussed earlier), where part of the aim of the journal was explicitly to draw more Africans into academic discussions of political economy at the time.

Ensure the work meets ordinary high standards for the disciplines and methods employed

Homogenous research programmes, however, do not preclude good science from taking place. One of the lessons learned from Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos is that scientific inquiry needs some level of homogeneity and relaxation of critical standards to get research done at all. A plurality of research programmes is for naught unless at least some of them have good evidential standards and methods employed. A robust method or vetting process can help make up for these potential shortcomings. In cases where activist research borrows from already existing practices and standards, conforming to them is essentially playing by previously established rules. If a piece of activist research conforms to regular standards of inquiry for a given field, it is difficult to object to the evidential power of the piece of research in question without appealing to an evidential double standard. Therefore, wherever possible, sticking to established best practices, standards of evidence and methodology in a given field (given that these themselves are sound) is a good guide for getting it right. Moreover, it will generally have the side benefit of increasing the chances that others outside the activist movement will take the research results seriously. This comes with its own risks. Of course, there is the risk of potentially deeply entrenched prejudices within a particular discipline that Kuhnian 'normal science' treats as 'business as usual' (Kuhn 1962). However, we must have some common language and mode of inquiry to get anything done. And the risk of going one's own way can be more severe, given that we then lose out discipline-wide checks on practice.

Failure to comply with disciplinary norms is a serious red flag that something troubling is afoot with a particular piece of research. For instance, when AIDS denialists—those who believe that HIV does not cause AIDS—started to be rejected from mainstream medical journals, they established their own. This was an indicator that they were no longer taking the rules of producing good medical science seriously enough. But it also meant that they missed out on the benefits of peer debate. Seth Kalichman, in his account of this case, describes the self-removal of AIDS denialists from the medical establishment as granting them a kind of 'invisibility' from the rest of the field, allowing them to drift further and further away from good scientific practice (Kalichman 2009: 1).

Actively seek out uncomfortable truths and inconsistencies

Critical inquiry, however, does not have to come from the outside. To ensure that one's research programme does not fall victim to wishful thinking, researchers can actively seek out to find and test

"inconvenient truths". These are hypotheses or phenomena that can seriously undermine the integrity of the research programme, such as assumptions that are crucial to the research efforts or, as noted in our catalogue of threats, about what the aims of the research should be, or of the value of those aims or about whom achieving those aims might serve and whom it might harm.

Actively seeking out potential shortcomings ensures that the breadth of inquiry does not stay within a research programme's familiar and comfortable arsenal of research questions and that the programme gets continuously pressured and challenged by internal formative criticism. A research team of both "insiders" and "outsiders" can help here. Insiders can have a good eye for internal contradictions and neglected research questions when compared to outsiders, by virtue of their deep knowledge of their own research programme's ins and outs. While outsiders from other research programmes can identify shortcomings that arise due to blind spots in the programme's priorities and chosen methodology, insiders have a sophisticated and well-informed understanding of the desirable views that are difficult to reconcile with the programme.

For instance, an activist researcher working on projects in favour of legalising euthanasia might, in their course of study, find evidence that challenges received views of other pro-euthanasia activists, which requires that they rethink and/or accommodate the evidence. Suppose, for example, that autonomy is valued by pro-euthanasia activists at large, and an activist researcher uncovers evidence that the consent process tends to be autonomy-undermining, say by withholding information or making a patient choose to be euthanised under autonomy-undermining circumstances, such as under the influence of cognition-impacting drugs or extreme poverty.

Similarly, in the US, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe conducted their own research in opposition of the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Their research unearthed the inconsistencies in the environmental impact studies conducted by the US Government and exposed the uncomfortable truths about the ways in which the concerns of Indigenous people were dismissed and/or hidden by traditional ways of doing research. Their research allowed for an injunction to win in court and jump started new environmental impact studies that sought to correct this problem.

Continually engage with the ethics and politics of the research and undertake regular critical self-reflection

A central element of OBFAR is critical self-reflection. Activist research has a duty of care to mitigate risks to objectivity by constantly asking whether there are any biases (such as sexism, racism or a commitment to a company commissioning the research) that illegitimately shape the way the research programme

is constructed, how the research is conducted or how the data are analysed. The activist-research community must, therefore, pay special attention to risky areas where biases may lead to failures of objectivity. In Section Four, we listed several places where suggestions of unpleasant truths might arise. OBFAR requires that activist research be attentive to these and other such risks. This allows for the researcher to interact with the research in a more honest manner and to produce research that contributes to finding the truth.

Often, critical self-reflection comes out of a horizontal dialogue between activist researchers and the people they are doing research on behalf of. This entails an acute awareness on the part of researchers that they are political and historical beings and that they bring their own conceptions and ideals into every step of the method. As Charles Hale writes of the methodology he encourages for anthropologists:

> [A]ctivist research methods (horizontal dialogue and broad-based participation in each phase of the research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame; thorough critical self-reflection) would tend to be antithetical to the political goals and vision of the people in question. In short, activist scholarship methods themselves embody a politics, which the authors affirm and critically explore; this affirmation, in turn, far from an admission of "political bias," is a step toward deeper reflection on the entanglement of researcher and subject and, by extension, toward greater methodological rigor (Hale 2008: 8).

To see how activist-research methodology of the kind Hale recommends can help eliminate threats from bias and create a richer understanding of nuanced topics, we turn to the case study of Christopher Loperena and the Garifuna land-rights struggle in Honduras. It is worth noting that Latin America has played a central role in the reconceptualisation of current social-scientific methodologies within the last several decades. Mainly, Latin America's history with neo-liberalism and western imperialism left many Indigenous and non-indigenous communities in these countries sceptical of the motivations and methods employed by social scientists, including anthropologists and sociologists, as disengaged from the communities that they study. Loperena struggled with this in Honduras as he had to navigate the different communal factions and his own commitment to the struggle of Garifuna land rights whilst still being able to maintain a broad understanding of the politics surrounding the debate. As Loperena describes:

> In retrospect, this approach allowed me to deepen my engagement with local politics in Triunfo, but it was far from a straightforward alignment with an organized group in struggle.

> Rather, I had to decipher local communal divisions and "take a side." Doing so required a deep and recurrent engagement with the ethics and the politics of research. Was I "right" to take sides with the pro-land defense communal faction? Would I ever be able to gain insight into how community members situated on the other side of the conflict understood tourism as a mode of development? (Loperena 2016: 336)

This constant engagement and critical self-reflection allowed Loperena to gain more meaningful insight into the complexities and nuances of the land-rights struggle in Triunfo. He came to understand that his notion of "community" was significantly different from how community was understood by the Garifuna and saw the development of local politics and experienced first-hand the violence against pro-indigenous land rights activists that was obscured in earlier attempts to document the struggle. This caused Loperena to refine his research questions and methodology which in turn, caused the data to more accurately reflect the nuances of the land-rights struggle.

Make concerted efforts at transparency about what was settled on and why at each choice point in the research

It is standard advice from philosophers that researchers should be "transparent" in their practice. Philip Kitcher (2011: 155) argues that science loses its credibility when the values involved in its production are too opaque. James Wilsdon and Rebecca Willis (2004) argue that science should be "see through". Inmaculada de Melo-Martin and Kristen Intemann (2018) argue that the values used in the process of science should be transparent, so that they can be available for public scrutiny (again, this indicates the ways that these categories overlap). Much of this literature focuses on the values being transparent, in which case the activists seem to have an advantage, given that they wear their values on their sleeves. The larger concern, however, is transparency of the whole scientific process.

Transparency here is tricky. Transparency itself does not definitely secure objectivity. Stephen John (2017), for instance, argues that the leaking of the emails of the scientists at the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in 2009—so-called "Climate Gate"—undermined the credibility of the science, since it exposed the messiness of the scientific process. However, one might respond to John (2017) that this enhanced the objectivity of the research, even though the public were not ready to appreciate the complicated reality of how science gets done.

Whilst transparency is not always a straightforward win for the objectivity of research—one might be transparently racist or homophobic in one's work—a lack of transparency is a red flag. There is an

apocryphal story about a Johannesburg archaeologist who claimed to have discovered a bone that would require that the human origin story be substantially revised, however, he refused to allow anyone else to see the bone. He claimed that it needed special protection due to its fragile condition. As a result, nobody believed him. Regardless of the actual veracity of this anecdote, it shows that a lack of transparency is a real issue for indicating the objectivity of research. This is of special concern for activist researchers, whose work might be under scrutiny.

Section Six: Ruth First in Mozambique: A research programme dedicated to objectivity

Much of Ruth First's work in Mozambique was subject to the kind of critique we have described from Van der Vossen. For instance, French sociologist, Christian Geffray, who worked in Mozambique at the same time as Ruth First, thought that the close relationship between the CEA and FRELIMO blinded them to certain realities about the peasant class in Mozambique (Geffray 2009). Indeed, Geffray and others worried that the Marxist homogeneity that characterised the research team at the CEA restricted their capacity for critical engagement. Colin Darch, a colleague of Ruth First's at the CEA, recalls western academics like Tom Young bemoaning the untrustworthiness of research done by "red-feet" (a derogatory term used for sympathisers of a revolution) (Darch 2014). Others, like First's contemporary Bridget O'Laughlin, reject claims like these that the research of the CEA was hampered by their ideology and the closeness of their relationship to FRELIMO.

There were concerns about CEA's entanglement on several fronts. First herself, was 'deeply concerned that the work of the CEA would not be politically compromised by charges of involvement with the ANC's armed struggle' (O'Laughlin 2014a: 26–27). We do not deny that their research faced significant risks, but rather point out that Ruth First and her team took great self-conscious efforts to try to be objective and mitigate these risks, employing all five of the strategies we identified in the last section. It is helpful to look more closely at how First and the CEA approached their research in Mozambique, since it provides some real examples of how all five of our strategies can be used to combat threats to objectivity.

Ruth First was simultaneously involved in both academic research and activism and saw the former as essential to the success of the latter (Saul 2014). Her commitment to reflexivity and seeking out contradiction and uncomfortable truths [Strategies 3 and 4] is ubiquitous in the testimonials of her colleagues: 'When our ways of working began to stagnate, when we were no longer consistently coming into contradiction with our own practice, she forced us to react, to criticise, to move ahead' (De Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984: 172). At a social science conference in Maputo shortly before her assassination,

Ruth First spoke about the limits of theory and ideology: 'How with a theory of contradiction can you do a better analysis of these contradictions at play? Instead of having these umbrella omnibus theories that we cart around saying the working class does this, the petty bourgeoisie does this, the peasantry is like this. Well how?' (First 1982). First was always willing to part with presumed assumptions when the evidence directed her elsewhere.

Ruth First and the CEA were also keenly aware of the challenges presented by their close relationship to the FRELIMO government. In the same speech in Maputo, First also addressed the challenges presented by this relationship:

> You've no choice if you want to be a social scientist in a struggle, you've no choice but to work through those institutions which are creating change. It doesn't mean an unproblematic relationship, that doesn't mean it's a service role, that doesn't mean that it's thought control or blind acquiescence. That means that given a certain realm and a certain terrain the struggle goes on in that terrain and the questions are how to work, how to research and how to teach. They are continuously questions which you have to confront, they take a different form on different occasions, and contradictions are at play. (Ruth First speaking at the social science conference in Maputo on the 13th of August 1982)

Michel Cahen, another colleague at the CEA, suggests, 'It would be wrong to attribute to the researchers at the Centre a systematic complacency with regard to FRELIMO. To the contrary, the criticism of certain matters is relentless and very detailed, with the aim of helping FRELIMO to correct its mistakes' (Cahen 1982: 114). Mark Wuyts, who worked closely with First on The Mozambican Miner, said at the conclusion of the project, 'At the time, I do not think any of us, including Ruth, were fully aware of how critical the Mozambican Miner would turn out to be in terms of questioning FRELIMO's policies, not just on matters of employment and migrant labour, but also on agriculture and on macroeconomic development' (Wuyts 2014: 69). Throughout her work in Mozambique with the CEA, Ruth First demonstrated a willingness and commitment to disagree with FRELIMO whenever the evidence suggested she do so.

Her academic activities in Britain before her appointment at Durham and her research in Mozambique are witness to her concern to train in and to maintain professional standards in her research. For example, during her exile in England, in 1966 she enrolled in courses at the London School of Economics (LSE). As Alan Wieder (2011: 91) reports:

> At LSE she met scholars from across the world ... and she had the honour of studying with

> Belgian-born Ralph Milliband, a one-time student of Harold Laski and one of the leading anti-Stalinist theoreticians of New Left politics. Ruth took Milliband's courses at LSE, and ... Milliband admired Ruth First.

Further witness to her efforts to maintain high professional standards is the pains First took to engage with well-trained researchers with established professional expertise and to bring them to Maputo and the CEA, and her extended efforts to provide serious training to the students at the university who would be gathering data. It is significant that the researchers she recruited came from a variety of disciplines, as Strategy 1 recommends. Among these researchers was Bridget O'Laughlin, a US-trained anthropologist who came from Stanford University where she was an assistant professor and whose later work placed her in a group dubbed "the rock stars" of agrarian studies (O'Laughlin 2013). Another was Jeanne Penvenne, who came to Maputo to conduct her PhD research in history at Boston University's African Studies Centre; during her research in Maputo 'the combination of archival research and oral histories [that] would become the hallmark of her historical methodology' at Tufts University (Rankin 2018).

A third was First's own Durham student Judith Head, who went on to work in the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town.

With respect to the training of the students, Wieder (2011: 98) remarks:

> Students and staff went throughout the country, set up camps and learned about and worked with tea workers, contract harbour workers, small farmers and cotton workers. Correspondingly, connecting their theoretical training and field work, they learned about the colonial aspects and exploitation of family agriculture, cheap contract labour, the petit-bourgeois trader class and technological exploitation. These were all issues that were later expanded upon in Ruth's posthumous book, Black Gold, a publication that came out of CEA work.

We see further evidence of her attempt to maintain high professional standards in the research even when under time pressure as well as of the pluralism of approaches she adopted for the research programme in the painstaking way she constructed the methodology for the research for Black Gold. For instance, in 'Working notes on Black Gold in the Ruth First papers, Senate House Library, London, 1977' we find the plan for method to include:

- **Review the literature on**
    - Migrant labour
    - Peasant economies in labour reserve areas
- **Construct questionnaires for miners' and peasants' household**
- **Other techniques for complex social issues**
- **Preliminary**
    - Open discussion with many different community representatives (teachers, men's and women's movements ...)
    - Attend meetings, participate in the work of peasants
    - Consult local archives, administrative records
    - Visit agricultural stations, training schools
- **Analysis**

The work plan indicates not just that close attention was paid to method, but also attention to methodological and evidential pluralism—note the combination of archival, observational and interview methods. Also note the range of research respondents included—teachers, peasants and migrant labourers. You can also see an explicit discussion of the methodology employed in the published results, in the Introduction to Black Gold, which reveals the same kind of attention to the variety of methods and the use of several different kinds of evidence used. This is very close to the strategies of pluralism that were recommended in Section Five of this chapter and is indicative that objectivity was being pursued.

For another example, here is what First's colleague, Brigitte O'Laughlin, says of her work and the CEA on another issue:

> [O]ur research on labour process in the port of Maputo in 1981 initially came from a request that we look at the difficulties faced by the port in assuring a regular supply of labour from rural areas around Maputo. In our counter-proposal we drew from our reading on the changes in the organisation of port-work in Southern Africa and elsewhere, on theoretical reading on Taylorism and "socialist emulation", discussions with Robert Linhart (1976) who was invited to the CEA by Ruth and Aquino, and by our preliminary interviews with port-workers that indicated that by 1981 most of them were living in urban or sub-urban areas and that the reasons for labour shortages in the port had little to do with the seasonal demands of peasant production. (O'Laughlin 2014a: 38)

These detailed descriptions of working practices indicate another element of good practice associated with objectivity—transparency. In Black Gold there are clear descriptions of methods, such as who was interviewed, why and the details of the questions that they were asked (First 1983: 5). This is indicative of transparency in method. Black Gold also shows transparency in values. There is no effort to suppress the values and purposes of the research, rather First and her co-authors are explicit that their work is aimed at assisting the Mozambican government and citizens: 'In other words the focus is on those aspects which have the most immediate implications for the government and the people of Mozambique' (First 1983: 3). Furthermore:

> The purpose of this study, which was undertaken within two years of Mozambique's independence, was to assist in the elaboration of a socialist alternative to a system of labour which grossly exploited the working class, which disfigured agricultural production in the southern regions of the country. (First 1983: 5)

There are additional ways in which First and her colleagues promoted transparency. A standard suggestion in contemporary philosophy of science to improve transparency is that work be made available for public scrutiny, to prevent troubling values from being smuggled into the scientific process (De Melo-Martin and Intemann 2018: 126–7). We see this kind of impetus across Ruth First's work, especially in her work as co-founder of the journal, RoAPE, where the explicit intention was 'to be informative, seriously argued and thoroughly documented without jargon, heavy footnoting and the turgid unreadable prose of most academic publications' (RoAPE 1973). Having more readable content allows for greater scrutiny from a wider audience, thus, increasing the prospects of objectivity.

To summarise, it seems there is some question about how much impact Ruth First's research in Mozambique had. Her legacy and that of the work she did with the CEA in Mozambique is complicated. Gavin Williams suggests that the research done by the CEA did not have an immediate impact on FRELIMO policies. Similarly, in a 1985 study on migrant labour in Mozambique, Grete Brochmann indicates that FRELIMO officials largely ignored many of the recommendations that emerged from the Mozambican Miner (Brochmann 1985). However, regardless of the uptake of Ruth First's work in Mozambique, what about its objectivity? We have claimed that a sensible notion of objectivity for activist research does not require that research be value free nor that it be free of subjective judgement. It should, however, require due diligence to use the right methods to achieve the right results for the right purposes. We hope that our brief discussion here has made it clear that while Ruth First was at the CEA, she regularly and self-consciously made serious and varied efforts to guard against the risks of bias and to secure

objectivity, which are essential when undertaking activist research. Current and future scholars hoping to engage in activist research would do well to study the methods and practices of Ruth First and the CEA. As her friend and colleague Gavin Williams said about her in an interview with Katherine Furman in Oxford, July 2022:

> You couldn't turn development into (just) South Africa. She took that on and she did it well, she did everything well. She didn't know how to do something badly. She was never sure that what she was doing was good enough but actually she never, ever, to my knowledge did anything badly. (Furman 2022: personal interview, clip 4 of 19: 01:31-01:54)

Conclusion

Activists have produced a wealth of considered, interesting and useful research on topics related to their activism. In many cases, this research not only contributes to our shared body of scientific knowledge, but also to the achievement of their own aims and the advancement of the causes. We looked at Ruth First's work throughout her career on topics closely related to revolutionary socialist causes as an exemplary case.

Accounts of the kind that we looked at in Section Three which are sceptical of the possibility of objective activist research, overlook these important knowledge-producing activities by activists. They point to a variety of additional obstacles to "getting it right" that activist research presents—for example, the involvement of social and political values and various cognitive biases. They suggest that due to these risks, there are almost no circumstances in which the research that activists conduct should be counted as objective. We agree that paying attention to such risks to "getting it right" is important and we think such risks should be taken seriously, however, we do not agree that these preclude objectivity for activist research. Instead, we take it that responsibly navigating these risks and obstacles is a key component of objectivity in activist research.

In this chapter, we have combined these thoughts with the methodological insights of conceptual engineering to begin to develop a theory of objectivity for activist research, OBFAR. We have focused on flagging and clarifying the threats to fact-finding that we think are associated with activist research (Section Four) and on providing some guidance on how these obstacles can be appropriately navigated by activist researchers. The resulting OBFAR concept allows us to give good activist research the merit it deserves, whilst clarifying the demands that objectivity in such cases makes over and above what we might expect to find in non-activist settings. Objectivity for activist research, we think, does not demand

that activists desert their causes nor that they abandon their partisan values nor that they abstain from engaging in research at all. It does, however, require due diligence to use the right methods to achieve the right results for the right purposes in the face of the additional challenges that their position might pose for "getting it right".

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