Methods for Change

Militant Research

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Militant Research

Militant Research prioritises political struggle over the academic pursuit of knowledge. It is "*a committed and intense process of internal reflection from within particular struggle(s) that seeks to map out and discuss underlying antagonisms while pushing the movement forward*" *(Halvorsen, 2015).*

The methodology works on the assumption that change can happen through people working together. Practically what this means is that the researcher must become an active participant in a political movement, while still doing research - it essentially means devoting lots of time to working as an activist or as an organiser. This form of research follows a 'learning-through-action approach'. In other words, it acknowledges that we learn a huge amount by just doing whatever it is we are seeking to understand.

Most Militant Researchers are anti-capitalist at a minimum. The approach argues that capitalism and the various interlocking systems of oppression that accompany capitalism (including imperialism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy) have created significant harm. In response, Militant Research seeks to experiment with and build alternatives in the present day.

The methodology also challenges academic structures and ways of knowing that are built on extractive research approaches and methods. It seeks different ways to generate knowledge, with a particular focus on processes and methods, and it offers a blurring of the boundaries between activism/organising and research, between researcher and researched, and between theory and practice. Because of its explicitly political nature, this work can be quite precarious and fragile. It exists in opposition to some of the neoliberal educational structures that researchers and practitioners often need to operate within, and this makes some aspects of it quite challenging.

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How does Militant Research create or contribute to change?

The main goal of Militant Research is to create political change. In focusing on emancipatory change, Militant Research is directly opposed to some other forms of research – for example, research seeking to maximise profit. Instead, the goal is to increase collective, emancipatory, political power.

While the writing up and subsequent publication of research findings is itself a key mode by which change happens, for many Militant Researchers this can be less important than what happens in their day-to-day interactions with the groups they work with. Within those interactions, there are three key areas where Militant Research creates change. These fit within a framing of 'impact-in-process' (Marzi and Pain, 2022) – namely, where the 'impact' or change happens throughout the research, rather than once it is published.

The first is in the time that a researcher spends working on different projects, and the benefits to the movement that come from that. Most Militant Researchers spend a lot of time on political organising or activism. Within that work, change can be small-scale, relational, and affective - for example, you might use your time to coordinate a meeting that helps your group to work through interpersonal tensions. Sometimes it is larger and more strategic, such as the contributions you can make to decide the group's overall goals and tactics.

Another critical factor is material. Universities are resource-rich, particularly in comparison to many of the groups and organisations Militant Researchers work with. Being able to channel some of those resources to different groups is a key part of Militant Research (Bookchin et al., 2013). This ranges from offering spaces for meetings, through to securing more substantive funding – for example you might be able to find funding to pay grassroots organisations to run training, or to work as paid collaborators on a research project.

Finally, significant change can occur on a personal level. Militant Research is an incredible counter to the alienation or estrangement from our communities that many of us experience. Because of its more relational approach to research and its goal to achieve social justice collectively, Militant Research can be motivating and sustaining on both a personal and collective level.

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What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

There are several significant precursors to Militant Research that also imagine research as a form of collaborative enquiry that explicitly looks to increase collective power. Generally, and among other approaches, people reference the conricerca, or co-research programmes within the Operaismo and Autonomia movements in Italy in the 1960s which explicitly used research tools to enable workers in the factories to better understand their material conditions; Participatory Action Research, particularly in terms of the link to radical education histories and the importance of action for the creation of knowledge; as well as feminist consciousness-raising groups from the late 1960s, who wanted to enable women to see their lives differently, and who particularly emphasised the power of the collective (Malo del Molina, 2004b).

The autonomous Marxist tradition also plays a significant role, particularly in terms of its emphasis on the emergence of new sites of struggle. For Roggero, for example, co-research in our current moment should aim to "produce new glasses, through which to see what is not immediately visible and perceivable, as well as what it can be or what it could become", which at this moment, means that we need "to hurt the bosses and create new forms of life and production in common simultaneously" (2014, p. 521). Militant Research can help with this by facilitating spaces for research, reflection, and action.

There are also strong links to some anarchist ideas – I particularly draw on ideas about being 'in, against, and beyond' the various powerful structures that anti-oppressive work (and Militant Research) contests. In other words, as a Militant Researcher, the aim of the research and the cooperation with political groups is to work towards a more socially just futures – this means working on the premise that if we were successful, this would eventually mean that the groups would no longer be needed in the same way.

Additionally, while this is less referenced in some of the literature, Militant Research offers clear links to a decolonial critique of liberal knowledge production and political organising – including, for example, the decolonial recognition of the need to make space for the 'world within many worlds', to reference the Zapatistas. Practically, for me, this means working in ways that identify and celebrate all different sorts of knowledge – from the relational, to the bodily, to the knowledge that comes from action, and more.

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Why might I want to use Militant Research?

- **To create political change.** Militant research is one of a handful of research methods that explicitly focus on creating emancipatory political change. It acknowledges how overwhelming the issues we face can feel – global inequality, the climate crisis, racial injustice, patriarchy, and so much more. In light of this devastation, Militant Research offers a hopeful way to generate small (and sometimes larger), positive changes in the world.

- **To stay focussed on social justice.** Militant Research also keeps you on track. There is space for a variety of methodological approaches within research focussed on social justice. But often, Militant Research can be a useful critical ethos to keep coming back to – particularly in terms of continually asking yourself, 'is this research labour increasing collective power?'

- **To achieve specific political goals.** Militant Research is strategic – it enables us to achieve specific political goals, using the resources we have.

- **To experience joy in our day-to-day lives.** A lot of the time it is extremely gratifying work!

We "... are activists because of the joy political work gives us, because even when we fail, working to make our society kinder, fairer, more just, gives a satisfaction like no other, because the comrades we find in the effort are friends like no other, and also because our activist efforts illuminate our social and political world in ways that scholarship alone never can" (Piven, 2010, p. 810).

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Step by step guide to using Militant Research:

1. **Identifying your potential contribution.** If you were starting completely from scratch, and did not have any relationships with political groups, consider what it is that you can offer. How much time can you carve out of your day for organising, campaigns, meetings, workshops, actions? What skills do you have – facilitation, campaigning, research, something else? And finally, what will motivate you – what political causes are you interested in? Identify relevant groups and focus on those where you can meet a direct need.

2. **Getting to know your collaborators and their requirements.** In terms of approaching groups, it is worth initially attending meetings and getting more insight into what their needs are. While it is important to be transparent, solely positioning yourself 'as a researcher', is against the ethos of Militant Research. You should be there to participate within the group's work and to offer your time in the same way that others involved in the group do. If you want a relationship where you are understood more exclusively as a 'researcher', it would be better to use a methodology like Participatory Action Research.

3. **Actively participating in the groups.** Once you are working with a group, the critical thing is to show up and to take part. Within this work, it is important that to bring your whole self. You are not 'facilitating'. You are in the mix along with everyone else. This could involve many things, but it will likely involve spreadsheets, setting chairs out for meetings, notetaking, and other similar tasks. Often, the work can be frustrating and challenging – but ultimately many people who try this approach find it to be meaningful and rewarding.

4. **Bringing in your research experiences and insights where appropriate.** Actively contribute to discussions, share your thoughts, and share your insights from your research – but it's a good idea avoid using academic language solely for the purpose of showing off your knowledge. You should be doing academic research into the field and the issues that are coming up. Sometimes the knowledge you bring from your work as a researcher is useful and sometimes it is not. There should be an ongoing dialogue between the practice and the theory. Finally, depending on the needs of the group, you may want to develop some specific interventions to help the group, using research methods or perhaps methods from elsewhere.

5. **Considering ethical responsibility.** If you decide you want to be able to write about the group or any interventions you develop, you will need to have the permission of your collaborators and to reflect on ethical considerations. Your approach to ethics will be specific to your academic discipline or your sector of work, the group you work with, and your methods. For example, you might wish to consider whether you are writing about your own experiences, how to make other people's labour or contributions visible and acknowledged, and how any of your writing might cause harm and how to mitigate this. This includes giving people the option to be named or anonymised. This can be a particularly challenging aspect of Militant Research, and it relies on you developing strong and trusting relationships with whoever you are working with. It is of course important to be as transparent as possible about what you are doing, while also recognising the limited amount of time activists have for lots of research-related administration.

6. Critically reflecting on your findings.
In an ideal world, you would then aim to develop an iterative process of discussing findings with the group or organisation and refining those findings. However, in practice, many organisations simply do not have time for that kind of work. It is not necessarily a good use of their limited time to endlessly discuss your research with you. One option is to find other Militant Researchers to explore these issues with or alternatively, as my comrade Jacob Stringer has suggested, you might want to develop an imaginary committee, who hold you to account (Adams & Stringer, 2022).

7. Critically reflecting on your findings.
In terms of the analysis you produce, there are many routes to pursue including both academic and non-academic publications. It's important to think about how you can share your research so that it is both useful and accessible for the groups you have worked with – particularly in terms of being considerate about the time they might have available to read your work. This could be as straightforward as thinking about the ways you can use your findings in ongoing organising with the group – or if it seems relevant, it could be through creating easily-accessible texts, workshops, or videos that explain some of the ideas.

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An example of Militant Research

Experiencing Corbynite Political Participation

Researcher: *Jess Adams, University of East London*

In my PhD, I used a Militant Research methodology so I could experience political participation within Corbynism and in post-Corbynism – or the exciting groundswell of socialist activity that took place around Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the British Labour party between 2015 and 2019, and the ongoing legacy of that period. My goal was to try to understand if and how the movement challenged elite power in the UK. In relation to political participation, I was interested in the fact that the Corbyn movement was not only thinking about the socialist aims to democratise the economy, but also an increased role for Labour Party members, the idea of using political participation to develop policy, and developing alliances with the grassroots left. One of the key arguments I made is that the Corbyn movement hinted at 'bone-deep' (Tuck, 2013) forms of political participation – in contrast to the 'nightmare' (Miessen, 2010) participation that currently dominates. I defined bone-deep participation as an embodied, material form of political participation, where collectives engage in pedagogical processes to achieve emancipatory goals. I understand nightmare participation as a broadly depoliticised and widely available form of political participation, shaped particularly by liberalism, where individuals relate to a group solely for the purposes of a specific outcome or outcomes; pedagogy operates in a managerial way; and the form of freedom sought is oriented towards capitalism.

As part of the Militant Research, I worked with several groups, including a campaign at my university called #SaveUEL, a national student group called the Red Square Movement (RSM), a socialist political education organisation called The World Transformed (TWT), and others. To give an example of one of the projects I worked on within this, I helped to coordinate an online 'organising school' for student activists across the UK. This was a partnership between RSM, TWT and the National Union of Students. It was a two-day, online organising school with many inspiring speakers and workshops, which one hundred students attended.

As noted earlier, Militant Research looks at how we can blur the boundaries between political organising and research, between the researcher and researched, and between theory and practice. In relation to how the researcher and the researched were blurred within my work, for example, I examined the role of the collective in some depth, particularly thinking about the figure of the comrade, and thus complicated my own positionality as a separate, removed 'researching' individual.

One of the key tasks in my research has been to identify where the 'wins' were. A militant research methodology was particularly useful here – because it broadly responds to the idea of increasing collective power I focussed on where power was increased, and sought to analyse why. Among other things, one of the most substantive wins related to how the university was negotiated, and often challenged.

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Where else could Militant Research be used?

In the first instance, it is worth noting that academic institutions are not required. There are some researchers who work outside of academic structures entirely. In general, the key thing is that Militant Research needs to involve a group who want to use the resources and approaches that come from research to increase political power – so really, the options are somewhat endless as to exactly how this might play out. But one of the issues is that this work can be particularly precarious, in part because of the challenges Militant Researchers can pose to the institutions we do often work for. So, along with many others, I have been thinking about what more the wider network of Militant Researchers can do to support one another in our efforts.

It would be good to see more researchers adopting Militant Research principles, particularly in terms of thinking about the resources that they could be trying to redistribute. It is difficult sometimes to hear of researchers who work on issues that cause a lot of harm to people, but who do not try to find ways to support the groups or issues they study, either practically or materially. At the same time, there does need to be some caution around focussing too heavily on growing the number of researchers using the approach. The methodology needs to remain true to its political ethos (as a reminder, this means it is anti-capitalist at a minimum and ideally contests other spheres of oppression too) – so it wouldn't be relevant for every researcher to take up.

Top tips

These 'rules' come from a presentation I devised with a comrade called Jacob Stringer – the full set of rules are a bit longer, but these are the most important ones.

1. The first rule of Militant Research is: should the political struggle demand it, break all of the rules. The political struggle must come first.

2. The second rule is that relationships are critical – they need to be at the heart of everything. They are what will give you the capacity to negotiate some of the tricky tensions Militant Research generates, for example around ethics.

3. Finally, the third rule is that openness, experimentation, and the emergent aspects of Militant Research are critical. Malo del Molina says that it is "… always, an open trip, in which we know the origin and how it started, but we do not know where it will finish" (2004b).

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⊕ Further reading

There are lots of resources about militant research and the ideas discussed here, including:

- Adams, J. and Stringer, J. (2022). 'Rules for militant research'. Paper presented at ipb annual conference 2022, Methods of social movement research: new developments and recurring questions. Humboldt University, Berlin

- Bookchin, N. et al. (2013) 'Militant Research Handbook'. New York University. Available at: http://www.visualculturenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MRH_Web.pdf (Accessed: 25 October 2020).

- Halvorsen, S. (2015) 'Militant research against-and-beyond itself: critical perspectives from the university and Occupy London', Area, 47(4), pp. 466–472. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12221 (Accessed: 29 October 2020).

- Malo del Molina, M. (2004a) 'Common notions, Part 1: workers-inquiry, co-research, consciousness...', militante untersuchung [Preprint]. Translated by Casas-Cortés and S. Cobarrubias. Available at: https://transversal.at/transversal/0406/malo-de-molina/en (Accessed: 6 July 2022).

- Malo del Molina, M. (2004b) 'Common Notions, Part 2: Institutional Analysis, Participatory Actio...', instituent practices [Preprint]. Translated by M. Casas-Cortés and S. Cobarrubias. Available at: https://transversal.at/transversal/0707/malo-de-molina/en (Accessed: 28 February 2022).

- Marzi, S. and Pain, R. (2022) 'The next REF should place greater value on the "impact-in-process" generated by co-produced research.', Impact of Social Sciences, 20 June. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2022/06/20/the-next-ref-should-place-greater-value-on-the-impact-in-process-generated-by-co-produced-research/ (Accessed: 20 October 2022).

- Roggero, G. (2014) 'Notes on framing and re-inventing co-research', ephemera journal, 14(3), pp. 515–523. Available at: http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/notes-framing-and-re-inventing-co-research (Accessed: 25 October 2020).

To reference:
Adams, J. (2023) 'Militant Research' in Rodekirchen, M., Pottinger, L. Briggs, A., Barron, A., Eseonu, T., Hall, S. and Browne, A.L. (eds.) *Methods for Change Volume 2: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems.* Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.

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