Can we do more experimental research with/in social movements?

Jacob Stringer

Abstract

While positivism in social movement research is often shunned in theory but embraced in practice, the most productive tool of enlightenment science – experimentation – is often sidelined as relevant only to physical sciences. Here it is proposed that much more experimentation could be done within social movement research, with the militant goal of improving the success of social movements, and the academic goal of improving the applicability of published research. The pitfalls of experimental methods are addressed, and an argument made that within many social movements these pitfalls can be avoided, and significant researcher-led experimentation carried out within an ethical framework. As this is a significant departure from how most researchers think about research, some necessary conditions for such a move are outlined.

Keywords: social science, social movement research, experimentation, positivism, participatory research, failure, ethics, militant research

Introduction

In 1973 Santiago Genovés, researcher with the National Autonomous University of Mexico, invited 10 people aboard an unpowered raft with him and set off to drift across the Atlantic. His aim was to put a group of diverse people under stress in an intense environment, thus forcing them to seek resolutions to conflict that might give clues to how world peace could be brought about. There was no way of steering the raft, for Genovés deliberately wanted them to be at the mercy of the wind and waves with no way out. When sufficient conflict failed to develop, Genovés set about, much like Big Brother television producers, trying to incite it. He did this by breaking the promise of confidentiality to those who had told him their troubles in interviews, with the aim of stirring up ill-feeling. All did not go according to Genovés' plan and the subjects of the experiment largely refused to fight with each other, though he was sadly unable to learn the lessons this might have offered him. Thankfully everyone on the raft did survive, more through luck than because of any safeguards in place to ensure it. This story, recently retold in 2018 documentary *The Raft*, is a good example of why experimental social science fell into disrepute in the 1970s. Genovés broke so many ethical guidelines that it's hard to imagine an ethics committee of today even having a conversation with him. They would simply send the proposal back with a big red NO written on it.

And yet…. And yet it seems to me we have lost something if we do not see social sciences as at least partly experimental in nature. Positivist social science is still with us, not least in certain Anglo and European sections of social movement literature where researchers deem it possible and useful to generate an ever larger pool of objective knowledge about social movements – see Tilly (1999) aligning himself explicitly with a conventional enlightenment project of knowledge development – even as that knowledge is apparently of little use to social movements (Bevington and Dixon, 2005). What is also with us is an obsessive re-working of categories – most visible in urban social movement studies in which the most pressing question often seems to be what is or isn't 'urban' – but visible too in, say, the ongoing battle to determine exactly what falls within collective identity (Snow, 2001). This addiction to ontology seems to have a positivist impulse behind it, acting as though we could create the 'correct' categories by which to examine social movements. But for all this frantic work to model social movements, most of this sort of social movement theory in fact ends up being merely descriptive. Even if we accept the models offered, including the more complex syntheses of models (see Opp, (2009), for example), it's difficult to know what anyone can do with the knowledge. Despite this, many scholars seem to buy into a project of adding to or tweaking this knowledge base. Many of them might reject the label of 'positivist', and yet isn't it likely that a covert belief in the building up of 'objective' knowledge is what lies behind a constant shovelling of knowledge from social movements into academia? Perhaps there are career drivers behind that urge too, but people do have a tendency to really believe the ideas that advance their material interests.

Meanwhile social science as a wider set of disciplines has not retained one of the most interesting aspects of the positivist physical sciences: experimentation in the real world. The only experimental social science one is generally likely to see (e.g the Centre for Experimental Social Science at Nuffield, Oxford) involves inviting people into a controlled lab setting to ask them to react to situations or make decisions set up by the experimenter. But often physical sciences follow up experiments in the lab with experiments in the real world – though not always, and alongside thought experiments and other methods. While I don't want to return to a positivistic point of view (or accept what never went away), the experiment – a probing of a hypothesis by setting up success and failure criteria in an intervention while *maintaining uncertainty about the outcome* – is one of the most powerful tools that physical sciences offered the world. It seems to me that experimentation is not the part of science we should be discarding when examining social problems.

Yet within my Anglo social movement corner of academic social science I feel that experimentation is viewed with high suspicion. Comparison as a form of 'natural experimentation' (Tilly, 1984) is acceptable because it does not involve intervention. But from where I view it in the Anglo-sphere the standard mode of research in social movement research is still to *observe*. This is reflected in the Anglo social movement literature, which is still dominated by *descriptions* of social movements, often with some 'explanation' offered through comparison to an ideal model, and perhaps a tweak to the model. Meanwhile interventions by

the researcher in real world social situations are considered risky – who knows what might happen once people who aren't researchers are involved in your research? Or who knows what abuse of power the academic might perpetrate by initiating social processes that didn't exist before? But with a fixation on *observation*, and a belief that this is sufficient to do analysis, significant sections of academia, including within the Anglo social movement literature, continue to construct positivist knowledge. They assume the superior knowledge of the academic research community and the ability to pile up knowledge as a way of solving the supposed problems of the field.

Now there is within these worries about intervention a worthwhile question about researchers making claims to truth. Touraine (1981), who proposed Sociological Intervention as a method, was not worried about making claims to truth, and did indeed propose that researchers could tell ordinary people the facts, but his later followers saw that an intervention needn't mean making such a claim (North, 1998). Interestingly, people worry a lot less about truth claims implicit in public policy proposals from researchers to 'democratic' governments, perhaps because of an excess of faith in the level of democracy those governing institutions have attained. The implicit belief is that the responsibility for judging both truth and consequences of the policy lies with elected leaders. Sometimes academic assessments of policies are made after the fact, and this is as close as social science comes to real world experimenting, but usually without setting up an experimental framework beforehand. There is, I suspect, a deliberate obfuscation at work here as to whether the researcher or the elected politician is running the 'experiment', probably in order to relieve the researcher of what must seem like too much responsibility.

Academics also seem worried (perhaps for funding reasons) by the fact that an experiment may not work – as though a null result isn't the most common result of experimentation in physical sciences, and as though we can't learn from failure too. Not that this reporting always happens as planned in sciences: medicine in particular has got itself in trouble over the years through its weakness at reporting failures, usually for financial motives. But where scientists fail to report failures, much energy and research time is wasted, and academics and social movements can also learn that lesson.

The power of experimentation comes not just from the testing process or intervention, it also comes from the researcher bracketing any certainty about success and being prepared for any result (Kampourakis and McCain, 2019). Again even physical scientists do not always attain this ideal of dwelling in uncertainty (Barnes and Bloor, 1982), yet the ideal has been a powerful driver within the physical sciences nonetheless. There is clearly a delicate balance to strike here: the researcher must feel the idea is genuinely good enough to be worth people's time, but without feeling so certain of it that later reassessment in the light of evidence isn't possible. Having adopted this bracketing of certainty as part of the powerful tool of moving constantly between theory and experimentation, we can then drop the post-experiment truth claims and

objectivity assumptions dominant in older physical sciences models, if challenged even there.

The best of Marxist thinking does try to perform this movement between theory and practice in the form of 'praxis', but this tends to proceed with much certainty from those making claims, with their new ideas slotted into an ideology (in the Gramscian sense) that looks very like a claim to truth. Thus the praxis mostly functions only across generations of theorists, by which it falls to a later generation to rebut (ideally with the backing of experience in social movements) the ideas of a previous generation that claimed to have cracked the problem of radical social change. What is valuable about the best experimentation is that the experimenter doesn't claim to be sure, and they themselves hold open the possibility of being wrong if their tests don't go as planned – one is testing a hypothesis rather than a claim. As we've said, real world physical science is often messier than this and individual scientists do cling to outdated models for all sorts of reasons, but I believe it is a useful ideal to carry out tests while adhering to a bracketing of certainty (or we could refer to a historically radical *uncertainty* that is held*)* about one's own ideas.

A social movement, meanwhile, is often a site of experimentation already, with experiments ranging from new tactics to organisational innovations. At the founding of London Renters Union I and several others suggested that in order to prevent an entrenched leadership group in the union we would hold elections to the Coordinating Group, the most powerful elected body of the union, every six months. Retrospectively we can conceptualise this election frequency as an experiment, since it was different even to most democratic organisations. We thought we'd hit on a way of levelling power in the union and were quite pleased with ourselves. Everyone could get a chance at leadership, no-one could stay entrenched in their position. But it turned out not to work: it took new members of the Coordinating Group several months to merely learn the role. They were barely comfortable in the role by six months. It inhibited decision-making because the elected members often didn't feel confident in their positions. The experiment failed and we switched to annual elections, allowing pragmatism to overrule our ideological wish to perturb any fixed leadership. So we can see that social movements experiment all the time, with or without academic intervention. Until now no-one ever wrote up the result of that little experiment, which means another organisation could waste some considerable effort by trying the same thing.

Existing methods

The refusal of experimentation in social science is not quite total. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the most clearly experimental method in the social sciences, but it is often accepted on the grounds of the effacement of the input of the researcher. In theory everything must be led by the co-researchers, not the initiating researchers. This may be a dishonest account of what really happens in many PAR projects, and some practitioners are more open about PAR as

conscientisation (Banks, Herrington and Carter, 2017), but much PAR literature continues to view the researcher as a blank slate. Action Research with a little less participation and a little more intervention from the researcher is in theory a permitted method. But it is notable that this is most actively practised in health and social policy settings, in which 'intervention' is already a necessity (since a professional is intervening in the life of a patient or client), and sanctioned by state institutions. It is relatively rare in the political field, with the most notable practitioners in the UK perhaps being the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010). Even much of the research in the Anglo-sphere that is bold enough to use the title of 'militant research' seems reluctant to intervene: rather the militancy is about alignment with the subject of research rather than testing new methods of struggle.

What is the fear here? A loss of objectivity? Surely the widespread use of feminist research methods mean that even Anglo-sphere academia should have moved a little beyond that. There is a perhaps reasonable fear that an unethical researcher might be trying to establish their own 'truth' within a group, that they may in fact be *propagandising*. But this can be addressed with good epistemology and method. It would be a worthwhile project to outline which epistemologies work well with experimental social science in 'real world' situations. We might, for example, find useful the epistemological approach in Kleining's idea of a 'qualitative experiment' (Kleining and Witt, 2001, Cox, 1994). His experimentation is directed not so much at intervention as at discovering the shape of social objects or structures, but we see in his work that as soon as the researcher draws close to the subject of their research a relational approach to knowledge-building necessarily emerges. Whatever our specific epistemology, we can perhaps assert a general principle that claims to truth either before or after the experiment should be cautious and contingent (Fraser, 1989). The researcher will be simply testing whether what they offer works *for now*, and *in the circumstances* and making only cautious statements about the conditions of validity of what is learned. Furthermore, in line with the idea of bracketing certainty about one's own ideas, the researcher should not have unreasonable confidence of success prior to the experiment.

When experimenting in real-world political situations we cannot conceive of experiments being controlled or double-blinded. What we can usefully do is borrow another method from the physical sciences by picking the criteria for success beforehand and sticking to them. PAR and Action Research have a tendency to view the process itself as valuable. So whatever the outcome turns out to be, academia can claim a success because something was learned in the process, and the social movement can claim a success because some knowledge or relationships were constructed along the way. There is value to that approach sometimes, or even in dwelling between success and failure to see what emerges (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2014), but what about the value of being rigorous with ourselves? Did you, or did you not, achieve what you set out to do? The Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) is also unusual in having admitted to more failures than successes, but that is very rare in published scholarship. In order to see our scholarship as part of a cycle of experiment and learning,

wouldn't we need a thousand, ten thousand published papers about failures? In the name of social movement success couldn't we be braver even than the physical sciences in admitting our failures? And couldn't we be more reflective than the Marxist tradition, which constantly analyses the failures of others' ideas but rarely admits that one's own claims were duff ones? From such scholarship a few beautiful successes might emerge, built upon multiple cycles of previous failures, able to move forward more quickly by dint of the uncertainty the researcher always admitted, pushing them forward rapidly to new ideas?

Social movements as sites of experimentation

Now I will argue that social movements are the perfect place to conduct real-world social science experiments. One reason for that, already mentioned above, is that it is in the nature of most social movements to be experimental anyway. This is particularly true of movements trying to create systemic change, such as ending capitalism or ending fossil fuel use. In the context of 'developed' capitalist states movements have to be experimental, for no-one has previously created the type of systemic change they see as necessary. If they were not experimental they would have to rely on sheer luck in the change of conditions making their movement more effective. Most movements become aware after a couple of failures that they do not know a magic formula for social change, and so must experiment with different methods, or produce little but dispirited and disheartened activists.

Another reason social movements can be suitable arenas for experimentation is that many of them offer a relatively democratic group environment in which transparency and group decision-making can ensure that participants are willing participants in the experiments – much more so than citizens under 'democratic' leaders. Democratically deciding which experiments to try is what many social movements and social movement organisations do, or at least try to do (Polletta, 2002). Another experiment my own organisation, London Renters Union (LRU), made recently was to try to build a mass campaign around non-payment of rent during the COVID-19 pandemic. It didn't work, for a variety of interesting reasons – including that rent debt in the UK can usually be evaded by moving house, thus removing the conflict necessary to build a campaign – but that's okay. It was a democratic decision to try, and the failure belonged to us all. It was also one of many failures we expect to rack up over the years. Social movement experiments only need to succeed occasionally for the movement itself to be successful, the frequent collective failures are simply part of the work of being in a movement. It is however worth noting that surviving this failure did require that LRU be an organisation with broader goals and strategies, not built entirely around that one campaign. The cost of failure to a single-issue, single-tactic campaign could be higher, but such campaigns are likely to be shorter-lived anyway.

So we are not so much discussing an individual experimenter here as a collective experimenter, with the individual having research funding to monitor the experiment, and with enough insider knowledge to propose it where necessary. Let's think through what we as researchers could do alongside and within social movements. Here are a few different types of experimentation a researcher could propose to a movement or organisation:

Testing concepts or new language in real political situations

The climate change movement has experimented with the term 'climate chaos' rather than 'climate change'. As far as I know this was an attempted language change that happened without academic input, but there is no reason an academic researcher couldn't propose such a change, then attempt to measure the impact. We might guess that 'climate chaos' has not become as mainstream as its users wanted, but a live research project on its propagation might have left us with not just a failure but a failure from which we could learn. Movements can (and do) learn without the help of academics of course, but often they are time-constrained or over-focused on one particular tactic. Sometimes the time and energy provided by academic institutions could help clear blockages to learning by providing a more structured learning framework for examining degrees of success or failure.

Testing ways of organising together

A researcher might propose, for example, that an annual conference of particular organisations might catalyse inventiveness or unity in a movement. While no control group can be maintained in most cases, ethnographic research or even simple interviewing could draw a picture of the experience of the experiment from the point of view of participants, and so test whether they regarded it as a success, or even probe for a possible next iteration of the experiment. Again this already happens without academics, but often unrecorded, or worse, where the failure is recorded in nothing but blame games rather than genuine reassessment of the original idea.

Testing strategies or tactics

A researcher might propose that door-knocking, for instance, would be a better way to recruit new members to a movement than relying on social media bubbles. This is, admittedly, a fairly small-scale suggestion. Many strategic decisions – which power-holders to target for instance – are more difficult for a researcher to propose, since strong opposing opinions may be held within an organisation. But political shifts have to come from somewhere. Why not include academic researchers as initiators of strategies?

Note then that the idea to be tested could come directly from the researcher, it could come from theory, it could come from other members of a social

movement. Wherever the idea originates, the experimental researcher can take it upon themselves to propose within the democratic spaces of the movement that the idea be the subject of an experiment, and volunteer to monitor the results, maintaining enough uncertainty themselves that they be prepared to admit that ideas didn't work.

Let's elaborate with strategy testing: we could say that one way to address Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is not to get into arcane arguments about whether their interpretation of Marxist theory is right, or to endlessly define and re-define the concept of left populism for years, but for researchers to either find a situation where it is being used, or to propose the idea to a movement. The critique then comes from whether or not the ideas work in practice, and the ideas can be re-worked on that basis. If a researcher can find a situation where Laclau and Mouffe are explicitly being used (by Podemos in Spain for example) then there may be no need for them to play the role of experimenter, they can simply observe it in operation in a more traditional fashion – though carefully bracketing certainty about the outcome and with a keen experimenter's eye towards whether or not it achieves what it sets out to achieve. But if they can't find that situation, or want to test it in a different situation, why not propose the strategy of left populism to a social movement and, if they agree, do a study on the results? It would admittedly be difficult for many researchers to find just the right situation for such grand interventions, or to be able to get collective agreement on it, but there are many smaller ones that could be tried. A researcher might know of a particular type of direct action or slogan used in a social movement elsewhere in the world, for example, and propose importing it within their movement as an experiment.

Thus we as researchers can, within democratic collectives, create something like Gibson-Graham's interventions ("We like to think of taking back control of the economy as one big uncontrolled and multipronged experiment" (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013, p. 22), though notably their most experimental suggestions are directed at activists rather than researchers, and even they seem reluctant to consistently blend these roles. This proposal is for a type of participatory experimentation recognising a leadership role for the academic, but without claiming they have privileged access to truth. We might think of it as an experimental sub-type of militant research, in which the experiment is decided upon collectively. This can also fit well into a wider idea of more democratic distribution and production of knowledge within and by social movements (Wainwright, 1994).

This approach could potentially serve not only academia but also social movements. It can help address some of the problems of social movement studies: that it is not of interest to social movements, that it is merely descriptive and has no predictive power (Bevington and Dixon, 2005), and that it has little creative thinking behind it that might provide ideas to social movements (Peters, 2005). And more immediately within social movements it can help do useful work with other participants, who often get caught up in the everyday work of sustaining the movement, or in repeating the same tactics over

and over again with no sign of success. An experimental researcher working in an experimental social movement can help ensure that a movement does not ossify.

Conditions and precautions

Being an insider in a social movement is an important part of the proposal here. The internal power landscapes and histories of movements are complex. Furthermore it will take a high degree of trust for people to accept proposals for experiments. The position of insider also renders some objections to 'intervention' somewhat academic. Within London Renters Union the reality is that as an insider, I might make suggestions for what the organisation should do in any given meeting. I already 'intervene' in the organisation every week. There is still an ethical problem to be concerned about: not the loss of objectivity but the power relationship of it, and whether the academic insider researcher might push ideas that are better for their research than for the organisation. But anyone who isn't conscious enough to guard against this could also end up making egotistically driven proposals outside of a research situation. What academia can offer here, at its best, is rigorous thought and analysis about the reasons for bringing forward a particular proposal, and some analysis tools for the outcome.

Rather than merely saying insiders are *best placed* to do experimental research in social movements, I want to go further and strongly advise against outsiders doing this type of research, in part as a safeguard against a return to the bad old days of *The Raft*. As Cox (2015) explains, participants in social movements receive a training that gives them a broad array of knowledge not available to purely academic researchers. I do not believe outsiders to a social movement can truly understand the likely risks of their interventions to the participants. To be clear then, at no point am I suggesting experimenting *on* people in real world situations. The proposal is to experiment *with* and *alongside* people in real social movement situations.

An important factor to consider in planning experiments is that in each experiment we try, the failure of the experiment is more likely than success. If this sounds scary, remember it is true in both physical sciences and social movements already. We must be sure, then, to count the possible cost of failure beforehand. If the cost is merely a moment of discouragement as a campaign falls flat, well movements must face that all the time. If the cost of failure is a hundred people arrested and subjected to the trauma of policing and the court system, that is probably not a risk any researcher should be allowed to take on themselves, even if they do manage to secure consent from participants.

This would all sit within a framework of thinking in terms of cycles of experiment, concepts moving backwards and forwards between academia and real world, between theory and experiment. Subjecting ideas to testing was never the problem with positivist sciences. We see the problems of an enlightenment 'scientific' approach within social movements more in such

reductionist thought as the founder of Extinction Rebellion claiming to have worked out a formula for social change, or organisers teaching standardised trainings claimed to work in all situations. Such claims can and should be subject to theoretical, historical and if necessary experimental scrutiny. Again, claims to universal truths are not what should be kept of the 'hard' sciences in the social world, but a radically self-questioning experimentalism need not be thrown out with the truth claims.

Leaving behind strong truth claims does not preclude the researcher developing their own critical perspective (Routledge, 2017), but creates more space for a conversation between movements and academia that might produce new ideas. What is also important to recognise is that, rather than an experiment always being able to claim immediate 'success' or 'failure', the effects of a particular experiment may take decades to be fully known. This is worth noting as a potential problem for academic research timetables, but when necessary we can always report experimental processes as well as final results, even accepting that process reports may have less power. We must also consider carefully the conditions under which something worked and be wary of generalising too far. It's okay if the knowledge development feels situated (Haraway, 1988) when we know that all the knowledge underlying that development is situated. While borrowing tools from the Enlightenment we are joining many others in making an epistemological break from it.

For all this to happen we are also likely to require some pre-conditions, and it may be that we need to try to meet these conditions locally, in one university and ethics committee at a time, before trying to push further. At a minimum we will need to join those resisting the secret or not-so-secret positivism in much social movement research that sees its role as building up knowledge within university walls, and as part of doing so develop broader ideas of participatory research that needn't follow the recognised formulas and that are more open to uncertainty and failure. We will also need to persuade many ethics committees to move away from positivist assumptions and be concerned genuinely with possible harms rather than eliminating risks to the reputation of the university (Carey, 2019).

Conclusion

Much could be learned about social movement activity, and the conditions for success and failure of such, through experimental rather than merely observational research, where experimentation is characterised by intervention, bracketing certainty about the outcome, and cycles of learning through reflection on success and failure. I conclude with a summary of the conditions under which experimental social movement research could be both useful and ethically possible:

- It takes place within a group or community that already wishes to be experimental, and in most cases will already have tried experiments

- The experiment has not been conducted elsewhere or in similar conditions, and the group has attempted to find out the results of similar experiments

- It is conducted by a researcher who is enough of an insider that they are not making naive, unrealistic, dangerous or redundant proposals

- It is conducted by a researcher who is not interested in establishing universal truths but in a more pragmatic knowledge production

- It is conducted in a participatory and democratic way with full transparency among consenting adults, with good levels of trust between the organisation and the researcher

- The researcher is sufficiently self-aware about their position in the power landscape of the group that they are constantly on the look-out for any propensity in themselves to abuse their position

- The risks and potential costs of the experiment to both individuals and organisation have been carefully considered

The logic outlined for a more experimental social science may well be applicable more broadly than I have discussed here. However, reforming the length and breadth of social science is a more ambitious task than I have set myself. Rather I have sought to argue that many social movements, with their collective decision-making spaces, are suitable places to practice experimental social science in an ethical manner. There may or may not be other situations where it is also ethically possible and desirable. But in democratically organised social movements at least I have argued that if we can both strengthen pragmatic, situated and participatory ideas of knowledge production, and develop confident but self-questioning insider researchers, experimental social science could take leaps and bounds forward in not merely understanding social movements, but in shaping them. This is not the only way to create movement-relevant research, but it is one way, and a possible route out of the deadly descriptiveness of much social movement research.

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About the author

Jacob Stringer is a member of London Renters Union and has been a political activist in London for many years. He is a housing and social movements researcher at Queen Mary University of London, where he is researching political narratives within renters' organising. j.s.stringer AT qmul.ac.uk