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Activist Participation in Academic Systems Three autoethnographic case studies of academic-activist positions in knowledge-work

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Abstract Based on three autoethnographic cases, this article reflects on activist participation in academic systems. The three authors are activists with different attachments to and experiences of academic knowledge-work. Our experiences as activists in academia help us form the argument that many activist contributions to academic systems remain unacknowledged. We are using these overlooked cases to expand existing participatory and activist/action research that often assumes a preliminary distinction between activists and researchers. Instead, we pose critiques of participation that are neither internal (in the sense criticised by Cooke and Kothari) nor external, but formulated from positions in between as activist-academics. Our critiques of academic participation concern exploitation of student work in academic teaching, lack of acknowledgement of activist knowledge in research processes, and tendencies to dismiss activists as professional disseminators of academic knowledge.

Keywords Activism, knowledge-work, academic activism, academia, academic participation

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present three autoethnographic cases of activist participation in academia. The authors of this paper know each other from an activist community in the Danish city of Aarhus. Further, Signe is employed in research, and Rosa and Albert are philosophy students and are both active participants in university life. We have different experiences of academic participation, and in this paper, we present and analyze one case each. Analyzing the three cases, we argue that many activist contributions to academic systems remain unacknowledged, and we point to hierarchies of knowledge that keep activist insights on the margins of academic knowledge construction. We are using these overlooked cases to expand existing participatory and activist/action research that often assumes a preliminary distinction between activist and researcher. While existing research paradigms within participatory research often emphasise the process of breaking down the distinction between researcher and participants (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Reestorff et al., 2014), we show how, in our cases, this distinction is propagated by academic systems and forced on activist knowledge-workers who sometimes have a much more nuanced perception of their own role in academic knowledge-work.

The first autoethnographic case is based on Albert's experiences of being underpaid as a student teaching assistant. He negotiates the conflict of wanting to live up to the honorary status of the job and its value in a prestigious institution, while also feeling exploited and underpaid by the same institution. The second autoethnographic case is based on Signe's story of entering academia as an activist. The last case is about Rosa who, in her activism, focuses on the importance of lived experience and bodily knowledge in forming nuanced understandings of sociocultural problems.

We are using autoethnographic methods because we wish to take seriously the value of our personal, embodied knowledge and experiences as activists. Autoethnography allows us to voice perspectives and stories otherwise overlooked by more traditional research methods, articulating our knowledge of activist participation in the academy. Specifically, we focus on situations where we have felt exploited, taken for granted, or underestimated by academic researchers, institutions, or systems – including systems of academic teaching, research, and media dissemination.

Our analyses are critical of the lack of (acknowledged) activist participation in the academy. We are building on Cooke and Kothari's prominent critiques of participatory research. In the book *Participation. The New Tyranny?* (2004), they ask if "internal critiques [of participation research] have served to legitimise the participatory project rather than present it with a real challenge" (p. 7). We wish to embrace Cooke and Kothari's critical question by expanding what is usually considered participation in academic work and institutions to include processes of facilitation, data construction, and dissemination done by activists who are not considered research participants and rarely remembered as contributors to academic systems and knowledge production. Our autoethnographic cases pose critiques and evaluations of different kinds of participation in academic institutions. These critiques are not 'internal', in the sense that Cooke and Kothari refer to, but are also not external, in the sense of non-academic. Instead, we position ourselves between academic and non-academic participants seeking to fundamentally question the distinction between internal and external perspectives on participatory processes and to expand critical reflections on academic participation from this position.

We will explain our theoretical framework in relation to the three cases when moving on to the analysis section. First, we find it important to address the ways we understand activism in relation to theoretical conceptualisations as well as our own backgrounds. This paper therefore starts with a conceptualisation of activism accounting for the authors' activist backgrounds. It then moves on to explain the autoethnographic method and its suitability for an investigation of overlooked, activist contributions to academic work. Finally, we analyze and discuss our cases in detail and conclude on the ways these cases can contribute to discussions of activist-academic participation.

ACTIVISTS AND ACTIVISM

Since our analysis draws on autoethnographic cases, our understanding of activism is tied to our personal experiences. To give a sense of how we understand ourselves as activists, we will start by giving an overview of our commitments, followed by a brief discussion of the different understandings of activism that are present in our cases. Lastly, we argue that 'activist' is better understood as a dynamic identity than as a label attached to delimited actions and commitments.

Albert, who shares his stories of being a student assistant, is also involved in different volunteer organisations both with regard to his university studies and outside of his studies. He is chairperson of Filosofisk Forening, an organisation concerned with (among other things) hosting events on relevant contemporary philosophical issues.

Signe, here, writes about her early experiences of being involved in grassroots student activism while also starting to consider embarking on an academic career. Since her time in the student grassroots organisation (Et Andet Universitet), she has been involved in numerous other activist groups and projects; from refugee rights activism and volunteer work at asylum centres, to feminist community work and protesting. In recent years, her activism has primarily been focused on prevention of sexual violence (especially with the grassroots group Ikke ÉN Mere), and she recently wrote her PhD dissertation on digital sexual assault, working within a participatory and activist methodological framework (Uldbjerg, 2021a, 2021b).

Rosa writes about her experiences as a media spokesperson for Everyday Sexism Project Danmark (ESPD). Besides her work coordinating volunteers and managing events in ESPD, she is active in philosophy student unions at Aarhus University, and part of a new series of student protests taking place across Denmark regarding the financial cuts to the departments within Humanities and Arts.

While Rosa's case aligns with a popular understanding of activism, Signe's case focuses on events that are not part of direct activist action but, rather, are derived from activist activities. Yet, the case illustrates how activist ways of thinking influence other kinds of professional and personal behaviours. Finally, Albert's case illustrates a way of being 'active', even when not explicitly doing activism, that draws on many of the same characteristics as activist commitments. These two cases broaden the perspective on activist participation to include the ways that being 'an activist' informs other kinds of seemingly unrelated activities.

CONCEPTS OF ACTIVISM AND ACTIVISTS

In the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary (n.d.), activism is defined as: "the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one". The definition emphasises 'actions' performed explicitly in the pursuit of declared political or social goals. However, ESPD works with a broader definition of activism building on James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance (Johanson & Vinthagen, 2019). Everyday resistance is subtle and usually unnoticeable to people in power. Actors of everyday resistance are also not necessarily aware that they are challenging norms, unequal power relations, stereotypes, or other factors which maintain society's judgement of right and wrong. Even if the actors of everyday resistance are not aware of their actions, they are, however, still partaking in activist fights against oppressive systems to achieve political or social change. Thus, our understanding of activism extends beyond "direct and noticeable action" to include unnoticeable actions and emphasises the political and social change as a defining factor.

While we find that cause is a defining factor across our activist commitments, we also experience that the idea of activists as 'fighting for a cause' sometimes results in prejudiced misunderstandings of activist work and motivations. It is quite often the assumption that activists are doing their activism only informed by passionate interest and rarely with basis in actual professional knowledge. Therefore, calling yourself an activist, you run the risk of being reduced to an isolated voice of passionate interest, meaning that your skills remain unacknowledged and your insights deemed far less valuable than those of other knowledge-workers. Being an activist, and especially being an academic activist, involves balancing this risk.

For all three of us, 'activist' is an identity that influences most parts of our lives and is not just tied to a specific set of actions. Being activists influences the way we think, our values, and our perceptions of ourselves. Everyday activism is connected to our feelings of personal integrity, also when our activist stances are challenged in contexts that are professional or personal. When exploring activist positions in academic participation, we therefore understand 'activist' as an identity that reaches beyond the delimited activist activities.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The method used in this paper is autoethnographic. Therefore, we will discuss some pros and cons of the autoethnographic method and argue why this method will allow us to provide new perspectives to participation research with respect to activist participation in academic institutions.

Autoethnography is a research method that combines autobiography and ethnography. The method is autobiographical insofar as its starting point is personal experience. The method is ethnographical insofar as it seeks to shed light on socio-cultural practices and experiences. What

makes this method distinct from both autobiography and ethnography is that it seeks to shed light on cultural practices through critical reflection on one's personal experience (Adams et al., 2017). Thereby, new perspectives and insights, which tend to be overlooked by more traditional research methods that assume researcher objectivity, emerge (Probyn, 2011).

A strength of autoethnography is that it can deal with the problem of researcher presence; that researchers bring many preconceived beliefs, cultural norms, and prejudices into, as well as have a direct effect on, the social environment of their research (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography can thus expose biases and relies on ethical and methodological reflections. A key element of autoethnography is its emphasis on the researcher's *lived experience* as a resource in producing data on unique empirical perspectives (Adams et al., 2017; Poulos, 2021). This also highlights one of our main reasons for using the autoethnographic method. As stated in the introduction, we want to take seriously our lived experience as activists by using it as data since it pertains to how we have felt exploited, taken for granted, and underestimated by academic institutions in which we have participated. Thus, using autoethnography as a method serves this purpose well.

Further, autoethnography can articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience, as authors can inform their readers of their unique lived experience rather than assuming an outsider's perspective (Adams et al., 2017). This allows autoethnographers to research everyday experiences that are otherwise difficult to systematically examine by traditional research methods. One of our objectives in this paper is to voice our knowledge as activists in academia in order to bring novel perspectives to research on activist participation in academia. Autoethnography allows us to use our positions actively to do so.

The above characteristics of an autoethnographic method make the approach suitable for our investigation; however, our methodological stance requires caution as well. We can only represent our own perspectives and lived experience. And since our own perspectives and lived experience are liable to unacknowledged biases, so is our investigation. Furthermore, our three cases are culturally and geographically homogenous. Despite these limitations, our positions as activist-academics are largely unexplored in academics' work. This paper, thus, provides new insights into activist participation in academic systems.

In the section below, we will present and analyze our individual stories drawing on this methodological framework.

ANALYSIS

This article has taken form over time, and we have, unknowingly, been gathering data for years. During our meetings of planning activist protests and events, we have frequently discussed the ways we have felt exploited by media, researchers, and cultural institutions. When finally framing our data gathering process as 'research', we already had a variety of examples that we had discussed between us, and the autoethnographic and analytical process was one of writing down and reconfiguring the lines between experiences, stories, and perspectives shared over the years. Therefore, the quotes used in this analysis are drawn from a workshop-like moment of sitting together, pen on paper, describing in text the thoughts, stories, and conversations we have had over the years. Writing together is an affective, contextual process of structuring experiences. Through the writing process, stories appear across our individual and collective accounts of experiences (Uldbjerg & Hendry, 2022). Therefore, the cases, as described below, focus on three distinct positions as activist-academics that we have found ourselves in, but we also emphasise the ways that the cases overlap and interfere. The stories could be different; we all have experiences that fall across and beyond the scope of this paper. The stories told here are selected to represent different positions between activism and academia, making mixed positionalities our shared focus of collective, autoethnographic writing.

STUDENTS AS ACADEMIC EDUCATORS

The first case focuses on the pressure that is put on academic teaching assistants which are students temporarily employed to aid younger students in their first years of university. Albert describes how he has experienced tensions between idealistic and individualistic motivations as a student teaching assistant. Based on his accounts, we investigate the exploitative elements sometimes associated with student teaching assistant jobs that are influenced by high expectations, competition, and underpayment.

Albert is a 6th semester student majoring in philosophy. He describes himself as an ambitious student who really enjoyed participating in teaching assistant sessions, looked up to his teaching assistants, and wanted to become one himself. He has had a dream of working in academia ever since starting university and was thrilled to get the opportunity to work as a teaching assistant. He describes his thoughts as he received the confirmation of his employment for a course in History of philosophy during his 3rd semester:

> I was ecstatic to have gotten the job. Besides having a passion for philosophy and teaching, the pay looked good on paper, I got to reread some classics, and the job looks great on one's CV. I was one step closer to achieving my goal as an academic.

However, Albert also felt a lot of pressure to perform. He describes what he had to prepare for each session:

> It was up to me to decide how I wanted to conduct the sessions. This included determining which questions the students had to prepare and discuss. Initially, I found this degree of freedom very appealing. However, it felt as if it was implicitly expected of me to prepare roughly 10 questions for the primary texts (given that this was what was done by previous and current teaching assistants), so the freedom I got, retrospectively, seemed a little performative. For this job, I taught two different classes once a week, two hours each. On top of being paid for these 4 hours, I had 4.5 hours of paid preparation weekly. The students attending the course had a weekly session with me, and three-hour lectures twice a week. In my sessions, we discussed the lectures and the required readings for these lectures.

The freedom Albert had in terms of conducting his sessions can be seen as an attempt by the university to provide more freedom of choice for both students and their teachers. However, there is a risk that this freedom becomes exploitative of the teaching assistant's resources. Others have pointed to how being an active student can be a disadvantage, as it takes time away from one's own studies (Linder et al., 2019), but Albert is also concerned with the relation between work and pay:

> When the workload was highest, I spent roughly 16 hours of preparation in a single week (including attending the lectures). This is simply too many hours of preparation given that I was only paid for 4.5. Nevertheless, at least from my experience, students and teachers expect you to be well prepared for your sessions (which is also the culture among teaching assistants). In this sense you are forced to do much unpaid work.

Adding to this concern, he also reflects on how the position is framed as a career-move, implicitly justifying the systematic underpayment:

> It is widely held by staff (and students) that teaching assistant jobs "will look good on your CV" or that they "will help with your career." But everyone knows that academic careers can be highly insecure and unreliable, and a semester's worth of running instructor sessions will most likely not be the determining factor.

Albert's case illustrates a blurring between volunteer and paid participation and the conflict between, on the one hand, wanting to do well to strengthen his resume and be a 'good' academic participant and, on the other, feeling a sense of injustice when expectations become unrealistic and the payoff (financially and career-wise) is precarious. This is in line with aspects of Mendes and Hammett's (2020) study of student participation in UK universities. Looking into active student participation, they analyze what they name "the paradox of the strategic-active student-citizen" (p. 175). Building on Cooke and Kothari (2004), they discuss how students at a UK university seem to be fatigued with or uninterested in participating in initiatives to improve their education because they do not see any personal benefits. The students are, furthermore, not necessarily invested in the university as a community that they want to help build and improve. Mendes and Hammett (2020) point to how:

> On the one hand students are explicitly encouraged to be strategic student-citizens (who strategically invest in ways to get the best degree possible at the minimal individual cost/ effort) while simultaneously being asked to be active student-citizens (participating in decision making activities for no direct, individual benefit) (p . 169).

In the UK context, the analysis points to commodification and expenses of university education which push students in the direction of seeing themselves as consumers and, in the words of Mendes and Hammett (2020), "strategic student-citizens" (p. 174) rather than active, democratic members of a university community. In the Danish context, education is free; however, Albert's case illustrates a similar dilemma between idealistic and individualistic motivations for participation. He experiences himself as an active 'citizen' at the university, resulting in a feeling of responsibility to perform good work. At the same time, however, he is also aware of how the job might and might not benefit his career options and influence his own studies. Like in Mendes and Hammett's analysis, the financial aspect of participation creates a sense of (in)justice that makes individualistic reasoning relevant, even when Albert is generally still invested in the university as an institution and in 'doing well' as an academic labourer.

Additionally, the university is benefitting directly from his extra work. Here, the potential exploitation of student teaching assistants becomes clear. What Albert describes can be seen as an instance of what Cooke (2001) calls coercive participation in the following sense: Student teaching assistant jobs can be viewed as a (partly) participatory project of the university to get students involved in academia. However, they potentially end up facilitating a kind of 'coercive participation' by implicitly promising students a greater chance of an academic career, while pushing them to accept a large workload and a low pay. This coercive participation is in line with the view of activists as resources of passionate labour that need not be paid or acknowledged for their contributions to professional knowledge and academic systems.

Albert's story shows how student teaching assistants, who are highly involved for personal, idealistic, and community reasons, participate in the academic teaching institution in very significant ways but without being acknowledged as participants in academic knowledge construction. This results in a mismatch between the ways Albert sees himself – as a community member and an aspiring academic – and the way the university sees student teaching assistants as 'free' resources of labour that need not be counted – and paid – as equal participants in academic institutions.

ACTIVIST-ACADEMIC BECOMING

During Signe's time as a student, she was active in a student grassroots organisation protesting university reforms and cuts in state funding. The analysis below focuses on her experience of simultaneously becoming an activist and academic during the student protests. She describes this process:

> Before joining the student protest group, I never thought of a research career as an option. It was the way that employees and older students invited us to be involved in their work that made it possible for me to see myself as a professional in the university. It made me more ambitious and involved in my studies as well, not because I was hoping for a research career, but because their approach to academic education made me view my role at the university differently and made me realise that the work students do can be actual knowledge-work with a value in society and in the institution.

This realisation could be part of an ideological student involvement, similar to what we described in Albert's case above; for Signe, however, it was not only related to forming an identity as an active student, but also as an academic-activist referring to a kind of participation that crosses boundaries between students and academic researchers. In the quote, Signe talks about how being part of the student protest movement teaches her to view academic knowledge in relation to its "value in society". This awareness of the social value of academic research indicates that she assesses academic and activist goals dependently and on the same parameters. Further, she argues that being involved in student activism was essential for her starting to see herself as a (becoming) academic. In this way, the otherwise often distinct positions of 'academic' and 'activist' merge.

Within the field of participatory action research (PAR) researchers often address the challenges of being involved in a movement as activists and academics, for example in relation to getting PAR methods accepted in the academy (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009) and negotiating power differences in participatory processes (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Hale (2006) describes PAR as:

> a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process (p. 97).

With this definition, academic and activist perspectives merge through political alignment and co-creation throughout the research stages. PAR thus bursts the distinction between researchers and participants in a way where activist and researcher, ideally, become two indistinct categories. However, Hale and other practitioners of PAR often take a position where they are first academics and then become activists through their research interests. Signe's case, on the other hand, addresses a more fundamental identity formation as activist-academic where the two become interchangeable and one does not come before the other.

As an active student protester, Signe experienced early on how the position as activist-academic was unacknowledged within the academy. For example, she describes one incident of research participation like this:

> During the time of organizing student protests, we were invited to participate in interviews with a group of researchers investigating social mobilisation. I remember going to the interview excited to see a 'real researcher' in action. During the interview, he was asking questions about our online mobilisation strategies. At that time, Facebook

> was still an accessible tool for grassroots organisations and while it had not yet been professionalised to the extent that it is today, admin access to a Facebook page allowed you to display simple metrics of how your page and your events were doing. I was surprised to realise that he had not researched the basics of social media affordances such as making and following events and knowing the availability of Facebook metrics, but I walked him through all the basic steps of how we followed our online reach and what actions (posting, engaging with established media, encouraging follower activities etc.) we were using to increase our online visibility. After the interview, I had the feeling that I had contributed significantly to his knowledge about modern online political mobilisation, and I felt that my contributions were worthy of acknowledgement. One year later, he published an article about online mobilisation in small protest movements. The article accounted for all the ways I had described our Facebook usage, but these were presented as research findings – as if he had figured out the system based on sporadic accounts from protesters who themselves were grasping at straws.

The quote demonstrates a situation where activist knowledge does not seem to count as reliable knowledge before it is presented by a researcher who is an outsider to the activist movement. In Signe's case, this results in a conflict of participatory positionalities. While the researcher was viewing her as an informant, she clearly perceived herself as an active participant in the research and in academic knowledge production. The research project had no declared intent of being participatory, but Signe felt that her skills and knowledge had been exploited. The risk of exploitation has been frequently addressed by participatory researchers (Cooke, 2001; Linder et al., 2019; Reestorff et al., 2014; Reid & Frisby, 2008), but in the example above a similar challenge appears in relation to academic participation that is not 'participatory' per se, but where researchers work with highly involved 'informants'.

The story of academic-activist becoming, and the account of misunderstood research participation reveal a kind of academic participation that is not discussed in research on PAR, and which poses challenges to a research system that assumes a given distinction between researchers and activists. The assumption that researcher and activist are inherently different positions has been a recurring theme in Signe's career. During her PhD studies, her research was publicly criticised in a political debate concerning 'excessive activism' at Danish universities, where politicians were targeting gender studies accusing it of being 'activism' rather than research. In the concluding part of her dissertation, Signe addresses the debate:

> I have heard many colleagues defending their work from accusations of political bias by pointing to how their research is not activism. I am not willing to do that. Instead, I want to argue for the strengths and integrity of activist research that is aware of, reflects on and works with its political biases and potential for influencing and changing the world – to stand up against the dogmatic perception that research cannot be activist. And I want to defend a researcher positionality that allows for human relations and affective drive – to stand up against the dogmatic perception that anger, and other emotions, have no place in research (Uldbjerg, 2021a, pp. 160-161).

Drawing on influential feminist works by Sara Ahmed (2017), Audre Lorde (1987), and Bassett et al. (2020), Signe argues for a researcher position motivated by rightful activist anger as a driver in research that has the potential to positively influence society (Uldbjerg, 2021a). This researcher position, which is motivated by the pursue of social change and driven by activist anger, is very similar to the activist-academic position described here. It is based on an acknowledgement of

experienced realities where political and affective engagement challenges research dogmas and inspires new research questions.

Further, it is worth mentioning how many theories have their background in activist work; Angela Davis wrote *Women, Race and Class* (1982) as a merge between academic Marxist analysis and insights from her practice as a feminist and anti-racist activist, and Liz Kelly's *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988) was written and researched while she was volunteering at a women's shelter. These are cases where activist work has had immense influence on academic knowledge production, but only rarely are these interlocking regimes of truth acknowledged in academic discussions.

Returning to Cooke and Kothari (2004), we argue that their question of whether "internal critiques have served to legitimise the participatory project rather than present it with a real challenge" (p. 7) also assumes a given distinction between internal and external, i.e., between academic and non-academic positions. In extension thereof, we suggest that critiques of academic participation should look beyond this framework and consider the mixed positionalities and overlooked contributions to academic knowledge construction coined by activist knowledge-workers. This kind of activist knowledge-work is addressed further in the next case where Rosa draws on Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice referring to how, when not given the opportunity of being heard, a person is unable to position themselves as a knower, and how a lack of justice regarding who is a part of the knowledge-process can lead to a lack of terms and understandings of the world. While Signe's case illustrates testimonial injustice where she is not being acknowledged as a knower, because of her mixed activist-academic position, Rosa's experiences below can be viewed as a case of hermeneutic injustice where activists as disseminators of academic knowledge are not seen as participants of academic systems and their methods of dissemination not acknowledged as professional contributions.

ACTIVISTS BETWEEN EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND THEORY

Our last case extends the previous points but focuses specifically on activist dissemination of research mixed with lived experience. While it is common among participatory researchers to discuss the role of co-researchers in dissemination (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Hale, 2006; Reid & Frisby, 2008), we argue that activists, even when not directly partaking in a research project, often play a crucial role in academic dissemination.

Rabeharisoa et al. (2014, p. 115) name it "evidence-based activism" when patient organisations and activists in health contexts merge their political practices with research activities and dissemination. They argue that activists might draw on research findings to justify their lived experience and bodily knowledge in processes of raising awareness, funding their work, and supporting their interest groups. Addressing the relation between academic and lived knowledge in evidence-based activism, they write:

> Patients and activists do not simply align or oppose these two sorts of knowledge to each other. Instead, they are engaged in collecting and confronting them as a key part of their activities. In connecting these two bodies of knowledge, patients' organisations are translating people's experience into the language of science and medicine and vice-versa, with an aim at rendering their situations perceptible not only to medical experts and health professionals but also to themselves (Rabeharisoa et al., 2014, p. 117).

In this study, activist organisations play a crucial role in connecting science to lived reality. While Rabeharisoa et al. (2014) work only with activism related to health, our analysis presents a similar case from feminist activism.

As a spokesperson for ESPD, Rosa describes herself as someone who has read and knows a lot about research regarding gender-based violence, gender stereotypes, rape myths and facts, sexist language etc.[1] Rosa describes the work in ESPD:

> As part of ESPD we mobilise research knowledge to find arguments that can provide political and social change in relation to sexism. We combine our readings and knowledge with the many concrete experiences about sexism that we collect through our social platforms. And our activism can bring important questions to research as we, through our expertise, are able to translate between personal stories and theoretical concepts.

This encapsulates evidence-based activism. For example, ESPD are currently campaigning to make stealthing (the practise of non-consensually removing a condom during intercourse) illegal. Their campaign includes research-based knowledge about sexual violence and ethics, but the campaign also relies on accounts of lived experience that can help convince politicians and citizens of the seriousness of the issue through empathetic accounts. In other words, philosophical, ethical arguments are important but not sufficient in the work of ESPD. However, Rosa explains how her professional and strategic choices as an activist knowledge-worker are often diminished when she is speaking from both lived experience and theory. For example, she describes an interview with TV2 (a national Danish TV station) regarding a demonstration against femicide in February 2022:

> In the interview I was portrayed as a "creative young woman". TV2 had asked me to bring a canvas that we (activists of Aarhus) painted during a demonstration in November 2021 on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. I found it relevant because it would demonstrate to the media that ESPD had worked professionally with this problem on several occasions before. But, when I saw myself on the news, I was disappointed. The professional aspect was not present at all.

Rosa criticises that the TV producers only used part of her explanation of the canvas that made it look like she alone had painted it and had individual creative intentions with it. In addition to this focus on creativity, the photographers zoomed in on Rosa's friend who was crocheting and who was not part of the interview but, as Rosa explained, "just sat there to keep her company". Further, when the interviewers asked Rosa to talk about the demonstration happening later the same day, they were only interested in the creative parts of the programme (songs and poems). As Rosa explains it, she felt like she was reduced to a young 'creative' girl who was solely expressing personal interest in the cause. Vaughan et al. (2019) criticise a similar bias in disability research where disabled academics are reduced to their lived experience while ignored as academic professionals. Vaughan et al.'s critique has several similarities with how Rosa explains the media's angle in the interview. Despite participating in knowledge dissemination in clearly qualified ways, she was portrayed as a 23-year-old, young woman, who could sing and make a painting, and not as a professional in the field. Moving on to talk about the speech she gave later at a demonstration the same day, Rosa demonstrates her self-positioning as a professional knowledge-worker who also knows how to draw on emotional and dramatic effects and stories:

> For my speech, I talked with basis in my academic knowledge about the abstractions of femicide and why it can be difficult to understand the severity and scope of the

1 Rosa's recommended readings on these topics are: Vaaben & Thomas (2022) on gender-based violence; Butler (1990) and The Men's Project & Flood (2018) on gender stereotypes; Jenkins (2017) on rape myths and facts; and Langton (1993) on how sexist language matters.

> problem, but I also mentioned the women that were killed in 2022 until the day of our demonstration, and held a silence in between their names to show respect. This was included as a big part of my speech. Feminist academics usually only speak about the fact that there were 4 women killed by men [in Denmark] during the first 2 months of 2022, and the fact that on average 1 woman is being killed each month in Denmark.

According to Rosa, these facts are important, but the numbers are sometimes missing the point: the concrete life that has ended. To build a stronger case around the violence of sexism Rosa thinks we need to have both aspects in mind:

> The big and general issue where we need to count the women being killed *and* the specific life of each person who was murdered. This is also the core of ESPD's work, to connect our many collected experiences with research and theories.

With Rosa's and ESPD's work, it becomes evident how activists aim to provoke necessary political discussions by connecting research with current and real events, making the research matter (more) by enhancing its effect on our world and our political structures.

When making these statements, Rosa draws on theories of social epistemology (Fricker, 2007). Lived experience is often neglected in academia, and even in some feminist research areas, but in the theory of hermeneutic injustice by Jenkins (2017) or Fricker (2007), lived experience is fundamental to truthful insights.

Fricker presents a case of hermeneutical injustice regarding sexual harassment. The case revolves around a woman called Carmita Wood who was denied unemployment insurance because she could not justify leaving her job. She resigned because a professor at Cornell, where she worked, had sexually harassed her. Fricker uses the case to show how Carmita Wood, by telling her story to other women who have had similar experiences, uncovers 'sexual harassment' as a concept by collectively naming it. This can illustrate the point that both particular cases *and* the general issue need to be uncovered and named if you are to understand a social phenomenon.

Fricker describes "unequal hermeneutic participation" as a crucial background criterion for hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 152). In Woods' case, the unequal hermeneutic participation concerns a lack of representation of women in law and in generating new terms to understand social experiences. In Rosa's case, we might argue that if we do not recognise activist contributions to knowledge production *because* they are using embodied and particular experiences, we will be exposing activists to a similar case of hermeneutic injustice. This injustice is harmful to research, as lived experience can contribute to uncover unacknowledged social experiences and structures, and it rearticulates the distinction between activist/embodied knowledge and academic/theoretical knowledge which makes activist-academic positionalities overlooked and undervalued in understandings of academic systems.

We see Rosa's and other activists' work with disseminating, contextualising, and revealing gaps in academic knowledge as very direct participation in academic systems. We can, thus, use this case to expand ideas of academic participation to include activist knowledge-work and criticise the ways activists remain undervalued and unacknowledged in academic work.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

Our analyses result in three overarching critiques of activist and volunteer participation in academic systems.

Firstly, we shed light on a number of contributions that activists and active students make to academic systems, but which are largely unacknowledged. In Albert's case, this included hours of unpaid labour; in Signe's case, professional research-relevant insights stemming from activist activities, connections, and ways of thinking; and in Rosa's case, contributions to academic knowledge dissemination as well as the work of connecting lived and embodied knowledge to academic theory.

Secondly, we use these insights to critique hierarchies of knowledge that become apparent in the ways activist and volunteer contributions are framed and taken for granted. Especially in Rosa and Signe's cases, these hierarchies are evident. For example, when the knowledge that they disseminated as activists was not given academic status, despite being deemed good enough as academic findings when presented by established researchers. This was also the case when media were unwilling to represent both academic and expressive/artistic modes of activism, even when these were clearly interlinked.

Thirdly, we show that while many participatory researchers have been concerned with breaking down the distinction between researcher and participant, this distinction is already blurred when we as activists consider ourselves professional knowledge-workers and parts of the academic system. We argue that while activist-academic positions are a resource and contribute to academic systems in significant ways, they are rarely understood in their full complexity resulting in cases of epistemic injustice.

The above points of criticism respond to Cooke and Kothari's call for non- internal critiques of participation by constructing positions as academic-activists that are neither internal nor external. Such positions can pose critiques of academic participation that are often overlooked by existing research.

We have formulated our position and critiques through the analysis of three autoethnographic cases. Autoethnography as a method allows us to describe positions that are characterised by their invisibility in academic systems and research, but which we know and inhabit through lived experience. Working from a conceptualisation of 'activist' as an identity that we carry with us throughout our lives, our three cases illustrate ways that activists contribute to academic systems in unacknowledged ways through ideologically motivated (over)work in teaching, research contributions, and academic knowledge dissemination.

We used Albert's case of being a student teaching assistant to illustrate how activist-academics – here meaning activists who are also involved in academic work and informed by their activist identity – are vulnerable to exploitation by academic institutions. Especially if such an institution does not sufficiently acknowledge the efforts and importance of volunteer and underpaid work to uphold academic systems. And when they frame underpaid labour as 'participation' with the (unrealistic) promise of future career options in the academy.

Signe's story illustrates the process of simultaneously becoming an activist and academic. We use it to criticise the assumption that activists cannot make valuable contributions to academic knowledge without an institutionally sanctioned researcher's interpretation of their work. Instead, we unpack a position that is simultaneously and dependently activist and academic. Drawing on Signe's previous work, we also argue that activist motivations driven by anger and the pursue of political justice can influence research in constructive ways by critically questioning its use and positive influence in society.

We use Rosa's case to illustrate how activists disseminate research knowledge drawing on embodied experiences. However, this way of working with emotional and specific cases in relation to academic knowledge often causes activists to be undermined as knowing professionals. This is especially the case for Rosa, when the problematic portrayal of her as unprofessional draws on sexist and ageist stereotypes of the young, creative, but naïve, girl, purely personally and emotionally

motivated. Finally, we argue that the tendency to frame activist work as purely emotional labour results in hermeneutic injustice where the activist ways of contributing to and engaging in academic knowledge-work are not included in understandings of academic dissemination.

The three cases present three different non-internal, non-external positions with critical insights into academic participation, and thereby expand Cooke and Kothari's criticism of the ways in which internal critiques of participation might serve to legitimise rather than fundamentally question it. We have been hesitant to discuss and compare the cases collectively since we do not want to reduce them to one additional position – why work to oppose an internal-external binary, if we just end up constructing a ternary instead? However, it is clear across the cases that we share a professional pride attached to both our activist and academic work, and none of us want to cut one part out to be only activist or only academic. Instead, we turn our academic-activist interests towards academic practices where we see a need for change: Teaching practices that are potentially exploitative, activist contributions to research that remain uncredited, and activist contributions to dissemination that are diminished in assessments of 'valid' knowledge.

Our stories are meant to inspire others to expand their understanding of academic participation, to include different kinds of participation in academic systems, and to not rely on an assumed binary opposition between internal and external critique. We also wish to show that this is not only a problem for activists, but for the academic world itself due to the consequences of epistemic injustice. Our stories are constructed to illustrate an analytical point, many parts are left out, and we carry with us loyalties to our institutions, our activist groups, colleagues, fellow protesters, and the people that we represent through our work. We have turned our focus towards feelings of exploitation and ignorance, but people situated elsewhere in the academic system that we criticise might have very different stories to tell. We ourselves have different stories to tell about the ways activists sometimes pressure and exploit each other and about the ways we have used, sometimes unrealistic, promises of participation in our own political mobilisation. Moving forward, we hope to hear stories of these, and other, perspectives in academic-activist participation being told.

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