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To the activists whose movements we accompany in solidarity, and to those researchers who share this commitment

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Contents

List of figures x
List of contributors xi

1 How can we research social movements? An introduction 1
Alberto Arribas Lozano, Anna Szolucha, Sutapa Chattopadhyay and Laurence Cox

PART I APPROACHES TO RESEARCHING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

2 Researching global movements: practices, dialogues and ethics 24
Geoffrey Pleyers

3 Feminist methodologies in social movement studies: gender, positionality and research in practice 36
Özge Yaka and Sevil Çakır Kılınçoğlu

4 Research from, with and for Indigenous social movements 50
Xochitl Leyva Solano and Axel Köhler

5 Social movements as learning communities, researchers and knowledge producers 63
Alberto Arribas Lozano

6 A Marxist approach to researching social movements 77
John Krinsky

7 Researching social movements in authoritarian states: preparing and conducting fieldwork in Iran and Turkey 91
Paola Rivetti

8 Cross-sectoral dialogues with social movements in Southeast Asia: translating values, affects, and practices in a polymorphic region 102
Gabriel Facal, Catherine Scheer, Sarah Anaïs Andrieu, Joel Mark Baysa-Barredo, Giuseppe Bolotta, Gloria Truly Estrelita, Rosalia Sciortino, Saskia E. Wieringa, and Wijayanto

9 Methodological pluralism in social movement studies: why and how 115
Donatella della Porta

Laurence Cox, Anna Szolucha, Alberto Arribas Lozano, and Sutapa Chattopadhyay - 9781803922027
via wesley hogan

PART II DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

10 Learning within freedom movements: using critical oral history methodology 128
Geri Augusto, Danita Mason-Hogans, and Wesley Hogan

11 Doing digital ethnography: a comparison of two social movement studies 144
John Postill

12 Media and communication activism: doing ethnography with ultra-right and progressive social movements 159
Cinzia Padovani

13 Visual research with Mayan social movements in Guatemala: a critical approach 168
Carlos Y. Flores

14 Back and forth: militant ethnography in the 'crowded fields' 182
Magdalena Sztandara

15 Making sense of the Narmada movements through Adivasi narratives 197
Sutapa Chattopadhyay

16 The art of talks and conversations in Indigenous research: decolonising interview methods 214
Keneilwe Phatshwane

17 Researching social movement participation in the Global South: what to do after discovering and recording plural and ambiguous narratives in the field? 230
Minati Dash

18 Using surveys to study demonstrators 243
Emily Rainsford and Clare Saunders

19 Analysing protest events: a quantitative and systematic approach 257
Tiago Carvalho

20 How do grievances become manifestos? Developing frame analysis in social movement research 271
Aurora Perego and Stefania Vicari

21 Researching identity and culture in place-based struggles 290
Ayse Sargin

22 Researching ideologies and social movements: why and how? 306
Susann Pham

23 'Repertoires of contention': examining concept, method, context and practice 321
Arnab Roy Chowdhury

Laurence Cox, Anna Szolucha, Alberto Arribas Lozano, and Sutapa Chattopadhyay - 9781803922027
via wesley hogan

24 Searching for mechanisms of social movement success: research on political and cultural underpinnings of protestors' impact 336
David W. Everson and Robert M. Fishman

25 Historical approaches to researching social movements 349
Stefan Berger

PART III APPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

26 A story of three activists: the value of activist action research in social movement learning 365
Jane Burt, Tokelo Mahlakoane, Eustine Matsepane and Mmathapelo Thobejane

27 Community-based research: approaches, principles and challenges 377
Anna Szolucha

28 Participatory research as activism: Orlando Fals Borda and the Latin American tradition of engaged research 387
Joanne Rappaport

29 Participatory action research in social movements 399
Laurence Cox

30 Using research in movement strategy 409
Natasha Adams

31 Research methods for studying collective action outcomes 420
Katrin Uba

32 Civil resistance research: how can we make our work more useful to activists and organizers? 432
Steve Chase

Index 444

Laurence Cox, Anna Szolucha, Alberto Arribas Lozano, and Sutapa Chattopadhyay - 9781803922027
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10. Learning within freedom movements: using critical oral history methodology

Geri Augusto, Danita Mason-Hogans, and Wesley Hogan

WHY IS THIS METHODOLOGY USEFUL?

To explain why this method is useful, we start with a modern-day fable. Once there were two siblings, Akinlabi and Akanke. They got along very well, and each year their friendship grew. Because they were so close, as they got older, they decided to build a house each, right across the street from each other. They were very happy and hung out every day and lived in harmony.

One day, a trickster decided to do what tricksters do. He played a trick on them. He sewed a coat and made one side red, and the other side blue. Then he walked on the path of road that separated the two houses and whistled loudly.

After he had left, the siblings began to talk. “Did you hear all of that noise Akin?” Akanke asked.

“Yeah, that was so loud, it woke me up. The nerve of that rude man waking us up so early in the morning with his ole ugly red coat.”

“Yes, it was rude, and his coat was ugly,” Akanke replied. “But his coat was blue.”

“No dear sister, perhaps you were sleepy from staying up too late. That coat was definitely red.”

“Are you trying to be funny Akin?” Akanke huffed. “And in my business about me staying up too late? Don’t do that.”

And with that, they started to argue. They eventually began to yell, and then they started to fight. In the middle of the argument, they happened to look up, and who did they see? The trickster, with his red and blue coat, laughing so hard he had to hold himself up from rolling on the ground.

When Akin and Akanke saw the coat, they turned their anger on him. “It was you, it was your fault. We don’t fight and now we are at each other’s throats.”

“Not my fault at all,” the trickster responded. “You both were right and you both were wrong. It was all about how you experienced and how you saw things. Don’t blame me because you wouldn’t see another perspective.”

This is why we are here, sharing this methodology. It allows us to learn from social movement insiders about multiple perspectives. It normalizes the fact that people in the same movement often experience it from different points of view. And those different perspectives empower people to see otherwise hidden truths. Like the trickster, dominant narratives of social movements often pit movement veterans against one another, preventing movement knowledge from being shared between and among generations of activists and organizers. To complicate matters further, university-based intellectuals often frame movements differently than those within the movements themselves, leading to a loss of trust between movement and university knowledge-builders. This leads to a loss of transfer of information from one generation of activists to the next.

Social movements disrupt the status quo. People within them often break laws that they see as unjust. As a result, those in power frequently and often inaccurately describe movement activists as lawless, violent, and shameless; as outsiders, or extremists. For example, all of these terms were used by whites in power in the 1950s and 1960s to describe civil rights activists in the United States (US) South such as Martin Luther King Jr, Fannie Lou Hamer, and John Lewis.

At the same time, inside social movements, participants learn from one another, from their opponents, and from their own experiences. As historian Robin Kelley (2002) wrote in *Freedom Dreams*, social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, and new questions. One example can be seen in the youth civil rights/Black Power group in the US, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The group came together initially by sitting in at white-only lunch counters in 1960. Over 50 000 young people joined local sit-ins to gain equal access to stores, schools, and neighborhoods to shop, learn, and live. However, after several years of learning through acting, and through experiencing white backlash, those in SNCC learned that "equal access" did not lead to "equality." They wanted "more than just a hamburger" at a lunch counter. SNCC people began to ask one another: What happens if you don't have the money for that burger? And then: Who does the banker approve as worthy of a loan to open such a restaurant? And: Who determines who gets to become a banker and thus gets to decide who gets the loan? Long debates within SNCC over such issues encouraged people to look within themselves as well, discovering places there where internal habits of authority and submission dwelled. For example, some people asked: Why did those activists with more formal education so often assume they knew more, when so much of their working knowledge came from experience of those organizers most impacted by Jim Crow? Or why were competent, qualified, and experienced SNCC women automatically assigned to typing, desk work, telephone work, and filing? What was the best path forward when an organizer turned toward self-aggrandizement, or slept with someone else's partner, or failed to do a job on time? How did Black organizers want to address the reality they had witnessed so many times before, of whites trying to take over their organization? How might SNCC best ally itself with other groups nationwide struggling against similar oppression, such as the United Farm Workers or the Black Panthers? Hundreds of such questions emerged from the intense life experiences inside the movement.

SNCC provided a remarkable learning environment for its participants, but it was not unique in doing so. All social movements provide dramatic learning experiences for people within them.

It would be reasonable to expect that such vivid learning experiences would be carefully preserved for future generations. Yet the opposite is in fact the case: less than 5 percent of the world's archival materials document social movements (Cox et al. 2020). As a society, we preserve strikingly little of the insights gleaned by participants within the learning environments of social movements.

This stems from several realities. Archivists often see social movements as disruptive, and do not prioritize their preservation. And social movement veterans see the way their stories are disrespected by mainstream institutions, and often choose not to share their records. In addition, people within movements are often so busy trying to change the world that they do not have time to record their experiences, or document their debates, victories, or challenges.

Often, hierarchies internalized by university-based professors often prioritize formal learning and credentials over the experiential knowledge, experiential-based theories, and new questions that movement intellectuals generate. And no one is quite sure what to do with the reality that social movement intellectuals' understandings often conflict with those of university-based intellectuals.

These realities mean that, mostly, movement intellectuals have only experienced seeing the red sides of the trickster's coat, and have not had many opportunities to experience the university's blue side with its many resources to tell movement stories and to present movement realities. This is true across the world: if a social movement's experiences are saved for future generations, it is often only preserved partially, and/or by those outside the movement.

Critical oral history is a method that works to shift these realities by lifting up social movement participants' content knowledge, as well as their intellectual frameworks for making sense of—or theorizing—that content.

WHAT IS COH?

In the mid-1980s, scholars Janet Lang and James Blight created a methodology, called critical oral history (COH), as part of their investigation of the origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Their method involved several components. First, Blight and Lang invited US, Cuban, and Soviet decision-makers from the 1960s to come together to recount their memories of the crisis for a four day "critical oral history" session in the 1980s. Second, they provided all participants with access to a common declassified documentary record from the governments of all the involved countries. Much of this documentary record revealed contradictions, as well as some falsehoods and inaccuracies. Third, the COH sessions were facilitated by scholars familiar with the entire documentary record, including previous individual oral histories with participants. Scholars were there to "keep the decision-makers honest," Blight and Lang recalled in 2013. Blight and Lang wanted to make sure that policy-makers from the different countries could listen to one another in these COH sessions, and see these contradictions in the documentary record, and have an opportunity to talk with one another in structured COH sessions that lasted multiple days. Fourth, each COH session was closed to the wider public, to promote candor and open exploration; but Blight and Lang made the materials they generated—the documents and the recordings of the COH sessions and their transcriptions—available to future researchers (Blight and Lang 2005, 2013).

This chapter explores how our team of freedom movement veterans and scholars adapted the COH methodology during six years of experimentation between 2015 and 2021 as we strove for a deeper understanding of the US civil rights/Black Power freedom movement. Activists were able to reflect deeply, alone and together, on their previous experiences, choices, mistakes, and what they learned from activism. We share what part of the COH method worked, what did not, and how others might use it.

WHAT DOES A COH LOOK LIKE

We held COH sessions in 2016 (on the origins of Black Power) and 2018 (on Freedom Summer and the MFDP, or Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party[1]), and as of the time of writing in 2020 have continued to evolve the methodology for subsequent COHs. These bring together four key elements in real-time conversation for a three- to four-day period. First, our team prepared, in advance, a carefully chosen group of primary documents (text, images, video, and sound recordings). We circulated this set of documents to all participants six weeks before the in-person session. Second, our team brought together a small group (10–12 people) of movement veterans from the 1960s generation who participated firsthand in the main events to be discussed. Third, our team then invited a smaller set of "adjacent actors"—allies and opponents during the time under consideration—whose memories and viewpoints might offer useful counterpoints. Fourth, youth organizers from the 2010s participated as both witnesses and conversation partners during the second half of each COH session, bringing their own experiences, learning, and questions to the sessions.

Over three to four days of the COH sessions, two scholar-facilitators brought the movement veterans, adjacent actors, and youth activists into conversation for three- to four-hour blocks, with breaks for meals and rest. A typical day began with a 9 am to noon session, a 90-minute lunch break, and a 1.30 to 5.30 pm session, followed by a dinner together. Such scholar-facilitators need to be those who the veterans trust and respect, and who possess strong facilitation skills to navigate the complex relationships and histories among all participants. During the 2016 and 2018 sessions, historians Emilye Crosby and Hasan Jeffries filled this role as a team. Key to their success was skill and experience as facilitators, expertise in the primary and secondary source material, and trust generated by their three-decades-long collaboration with one another and with SNCC veterans.

In the 2016 and 2018 COH sessions themselves, fierce discussions erupted, the electricity of them seemingly unabated after the passage of half a century. Surprisingly, upon hearing one another's points of view, people actually shared with one another off-camera, often during the meals interspersed throughout the session: the comments were often some version of, "Well, I did say this, I did that. I was an asshole back then." This sense of self-knowledge, and empathy with themselves and toward others, is something that multiple participants noted as particularly meaningful following the COH sessions. People shared in the moment, reflected upon, and even at times reconciled some of the heavy, negative feelings they had carried over years toward other members of SNCC and toward adjacent actors. At the first COH in 2016, we invited eight youth organizers from the Movement for Black Lives to campus to observe and ask questions. Youth insight often led the veteran activists to deeper reflection. The intergenerational aspect was so successful that we extended and formalized this as part of the process in 2018, so that at the end of each morning or afternoon session in 2018, the young organizers had 30–45 minutes to set the agenda, ask questions, and make critical observations.

Youth activists involved raised questions that neither participants nor scholars had addressed, and thus expanded the scope of the COH sessions in unexpected ways. This also fostered the establishment and growth of substantive relationships between youth and veteran activists. Over shared meals and informal time during the COH sessions, these intergenerational ties allowed for significant new understandings to emerge, that found their way back into the formal sessions. In the presence of youth organizers, SNCC veterans' mindset shifted from simply talking to "history" to talking with flesh-and-blood youth trying to make changes in the present society. SNCC veterans' energy levels shifted: they leaned forward in their seats and their faces grew more animated. They were determined to share their experience with young people doing similar work 50 years later. For example, the Dream Defenders group emerged in the 2010s as a part of the Movement for Black Lives, operating mostly in Florida (Davis 2019;

Hogan 2019). When SNCC veteran Bob Moses began to ask Dream Defenders founder Phil Agnew a series of thoughtful questions about how Dream Defenders approached organizing in Florida between 2013 and 2018, it opened up an exciting, challenging conversation about the ways in which the organizing tradition manifested in the 2010s, and its commonalities with, and differences from, SNCC's work. Young people as interlocutors facilitated a more thorough accounting of the events in both the 1960s and the 2010s.

In all of the COH work before and during the sessions, tone and ambience were not marginal concerns, but central to the success of this oral history work. Encouraged by Augusto, who wrote up a thoughtful, comprehensive *aide de memoire* concept paper for Mason-Hogans and Hogan, we made artistic adjustments to modify what could otherwise come across as a dry, historical methodology, tweaking it to accommodate the freedom movement's cultural norms. Kristina Williams, a Duke University history graduate student, created a Spotify playlist of more than 50 songs, starting with Motown and Sam Cooke, that greeted everyone upon entry. We projected a slideshow of images from the movement in the morning and during lunch every day of the COH sessions. These sounds and images evoked memories and feelings that were central to movement work. Social relations and camaraderie within organizations, most SNCC members averred, was intrinsic to how work got done, and thus to how movement knowledge got constructed. Project manager Danita Mason-Hogans made sure to have food typical in the South, adapted to people's dietary restrictions, available to all participants throughout the COH sessions. At the conclusion of the last COH session in 2016, Mason-Hogans's family brought in four fresh pies, invoking a long history of shared meals after church on Sundays. Participants' faces lit up with excitement and appreciation, and much joyfulness ensued. Photographers were on hand to take pictures of artifacts and documents that participants brought with them from personal archives, so they never left their owners' possession. The SLP^2–Duke team felt that it was key to bring all of one's senses to the construction of freedom movement knowledge.

The very intentional way that SNCC veteran Geri Augusto opened the first COH session set the stage for giving people encouragement and permission for many complex and sometimes contradictory memories to surface. She encouraged Mason-Hogans to be thoughtful about lighting that would not wear people out, providing easily digestible versus heavy food, and most importantly, she made sure that Mason-Hogans's team provided information about everyone in the room, their background, and how they were connected to the project, in order to facilitate a level of trust and create a sense of a "freedom movement community." This community joined together people from all walks of life who had proven themselves trustworthy through their work and activism. When all were seated around the table on day one in 2016, Augusto opened: "Remembering is a moral act," she stated. "Each of you saw the emergence of Black Power as an idea in its early practice in a different way," she shared. "I think of it like this: each of you came into the same room, but at a different point; you left on a different note. You might have stayed in the same house, but with a different set of people. We were all reading, many of you were reading, the very same books, but you were not necessarily reading them in common. Or the way you came across them or interpreted them might have been different." It was important to honor those divergent ways of thinking about, and interpreting, the same set of events and books. She made sure that people understood: "We want to bring out all those different ways" of being in the freedom movement, "and different paths by which people came to them."

At the end of each COH, our team took the extensive audio and video documentation, transcribed it, and sent it to each participant for editing. We then compiled the edited audio, video, and transcript files. They were archived in a collection by an archivist who understood and supported the COH process, and who was committed to sharing the materials in a frame created by the social movement participants. In our case, this frame was the SNCC Digital Gateway.

HOW TO SET THE TABLE: BUILDING TRUST

Many oral history "how-tos" start with explaining how to interview. For COH sessions we start much earlier, many weeks and sometimes months, long before the COH sessions themselves. We have found this often hidden part of the work is the essential glue—the trust-building—that allows COH work to happen at all.

To make it clear how we, the co-authors and co-facilitators, built trust with COH participants, we had to consistently be self-aware as well as to understand what particular strengths each of us brought to the table. So we start with our small team of three people, the co-authors.

Geri Augusto was a teenager between 1960 and 1968, when SNCC was the only national, Southern-based civil rights organization begun and led primarily by young people, with most being younger than 25 years old. Dr King called SNCC the "storm troopers" of the movement, who could push the movement forward because "they do not have to think of their families, their positions, or who's going to preach next Sunday like we do" (Laue 1989, p. 241). SNCC's full-time student workers, "field secretaries," worked with local Black activists, sharecroppers, teachers, ministers, and day laborers to generate innovative political organizations such as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. These groups aimed to create a radically inclusive democracy that valued all of its citizens.

Within that short decade, Augusto took part in SNCC as it "set the agenda for the country," recalled Southern white human rights activist Anne Braden (n.d.). "It was a humane agenda that was for all. It broadened democracy for everybody." And yet, 50 years later, at a reunion in 2010, Augusto and other SNCC veterans realized that very few US school children, or indeed US citizens, knew anything about SNCC's work.

It is hard to believe. Imagine if the scientists who worked on mapping the human genome had never found a journal willing to publish their findings. Picture what our world would be like if the first team to transplant a human organ were never allowed to share their successes or their errors with subsequent teams of surgeons. And envision the first groups of astronauts launched into space. What if NASA never listened to their experience?

Ridiculous, you may say: Unthinkable. We value science, medicine, and technology too highly for that to happen. We require our scientists to publish. We demand our inventive doctors educate their peers. We oblige our astronauts to share their experiences in nitty-gritty detail with NASA. The debriefing process at NASA, explains Paul Hill, Director of Mission Operations, is so intense, graphic, and thorough in order to provide "continuous improvement—because failure to us can be huge and catastrophic" (Hill 2018). Within Mission Control, they have found it key to dissect both failures and successes. We value these people sharing their experiences and findings—even compel them to—because they are essential to allow our science to advance, our medicine to improve, our exploration of the known universe to expand.

We do not, however, put the same value on democracy's brilliant innovators. We have not demanded that those who made real "one person, one vote" in the US share their experience with the rest of us. We do not teach their essential tools to every schoolchild. Our universities and think tanks do not insist on sharing their findings or make it a priority to build on their advances. Until the last decade, few even realized that this vital information was missing from the public eye. As people in the US teeter on the edge of losing the country's most elemental promise of "one person, one vote," that debrief is long overdue.

By 2011, with a new repressive wave of voter suppression tactics hurtling through state legislatures across the US, the veterans of SNCC formed their own nonprofit (501c3), the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP), to share their experiential knowledge more widely. Augusto attended a civil rights event at the Library of Congress in that year and talked with a teenager who had just made a rap song laying out the history of his high school; in that song the student referenced a SNCC veteran who was also an alumnus of the school. That was the kind of thing Augusto had in mind going forward: getting more people to know about SNCC and its history, and for SNCC members to tell those stories in their own way. How could SLP sow seeds for other people to take this historical information and create new work that would speak to younger generations' experiences?

Augusto decided to look at historical methodologies that might open up these broader possibilities. She and Charlie Cobb were both teaching at Brown University. Augusto was familiar with the COH methodology of James Blight and Janet Lang, who developed it initially to help understand more fully the origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Blight and Lang 2013). Augusto and Cobb asked how the SLP might adapt a similar approach to the political context of the Deep South in the 1960s. Blight and Lang's method intrigued them, Augusto realized, but the SNCC veterans "speak from a different history. So what needed to be different?" Augusto and Cobb wrote a six-page proposal for their peers on the SLP board in 2011, asking the board to consider adapting the COH method. Augusto's intellectual leadership, from conceptualization, advocating for the method with the SNCC Legacy Board, through her guidance on implementation and adaptation, and her setting the stage for the conferences by opening them up on day one each time, has proved foundational to this work.

When we set out to implement this proposal in 2015, we intentionally sought to hire a Project Manager who was outside the university, rooted in a Black community and freedom movement-based intellectual environment. The fact that the person we hired, Danita Mason-Hogans, was also an educational activist was a plus. Because of her separateness from the academic system and her movement spirit, Mason-Hogans was able to implement our COH project in a way that allowed for perspectives otherwise inaccessible due to a long history of institutional racism and bureaucratic limitations. Once on board, Mason-Hogans chose a very intentional way to interact with every COH participant, from the moment she first contacted them to the time she dropped them off at the airport following the sessions. Rather than embody the sterile interactions so common in academic settings, Mason-Hogans lived a freedom movement ethos. Prior to the COH, before anyone came to campus, Mason-Hogans intentionally held multiple conversations with COH participants to answer their questions, and lessen their anxieties and mistrust of large predominantly white institutions which had so often exploited their narratives. She tried to make them comfortable with the COH process by getting to know them beforehand, acknowledging truthfully their skepticism and anger with the way they and their memories had been treated by institutions such as Duke (and sometimes by Duke itself). She made sure to prepare for health considerations; for example, she ordered special meals for people who had food allergies; she made fruit and juice available throughout the sessions for participants who were diabetic; and she arranged for transportation within campus when some participants had movement restrictions. Before each gathering, she held several meetings to get to know the people who would be caring for participants: those working the car service and the catering services, and hotel employees. Mason-Hogans wanted those providing transportation, food, and lodging to the COH participants to know exactly who they were dealing with: she told them that these were the twentieth century versions of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. She made sure that they knew how dynamic and vital the contributions were that these SNCC veterans had made to the nation's history, and how important it was to treat these elders with care and respect. She did this because she knew that for some COH participants, travel to a place where they did not know many people could be particularly intimidating. Her family (her husband, her parents in their seventies, and her teenage children) came to the sessions and greeted people. In a hundred small and meaningful ways, Mason-Hogans showed COH participants that they, not just their memories, mattered.

Later, when Augusto and Hogan asked COH participants to reflect on their experience as part of the COH sessions, people repeatedly noted how much it meant to them that Mason-Hogans laid the groundwork with such care for them as individuals. They brought photographs and other artifacts with them to the COH sessions because they felt that Mason-Hogans was a reliable person who would treat such artifacts with respect. While it is not always discussed in methodological articles, Mason-Hogans's approach deserves a bit more attention, because it fostered so much longer-term trust and therefore encouraged movement veterans to share their knowledge and experience more fully.

The warmth and belonging with which Mason-Hogans approached COH participants showed how grateful the SLP–Duke team were that the COH participants came to share with us; she made people feel that they were a part of a collective, whatever perspective they came with, and that they had an important story to tell. Mason-Hogans also held discussions beforehand with the undergraduate and graduate students working with the COH team, to sensitize them to regional and generational norms for COH participants. She explained that it is normative to call an elder who you are not familiar with "Mr" and "Ms." That often, young people in the South use these honorifics not out of submission or an extension of "respectability politics," but to acknowledge the historic racialized disrespect and mistreatment of elders in the community, and are therefore intentional about acknowledging their status, as a show of quiet affection for what they have been through and have done for the community. Our meal gatherings each night following the conference allowed people to see each other in an informal way, develop fond memories, and meet young people in a setting that was less taxing. For some young people, there was real value in learning that the SNCC veterans could drink them under the table, stay up late into the night, and be ready the next morning to get to work.

It is essential to be transparent about the time, additional work, and intentionality it takes to make such a COH environment possible. In addition to the practices above, Mason-Hogans hired for the student team and the filmmaking team people willing to deepen this movement ethos in their own practice, including local youth activists attending North Carolina Central University, a historically Black university less than 2 miles from Duke. She selected a Black-owned and -led filmmaking collective, Free Southern Media, to record the 2018 sessions. Mason-Hogans and Hogan had to jump over higher bureaucratic hurdles to create this team and type of collaboration (our university makes it much easier to work with people already within it), but the team spirit and way of working reflected a relational, rather than an extractive, way of interacting with one another and our COH participants.

As the final member of the team, university-based Primary Investigator Wesley Hogan was the responsible party to the primary funder (the US National Endowment for the Humanities). Being the Primary Investigator (PI) in charge of funding gave her unequal access to power; being white made her unequipped to have firsthand experience with many of the concerns that SNCC veterans had. Further, as a white scholar working at Duke, the South's wealthiest predominantly white private research university, she understood how skeptical SNCC people were likely to be about her trustworthiness. To make sure that she was accountable first to SNCC activists and not to the funding agency, she had to step outside of usual university practices where the PI gets to make the major decisions about who to hire, how to allocate budget, and how to frame the project. All of these decisions were made collectively with a group of SLP members including Augusto, and then once onboard, Mason-Hogans. Due to her experiential limitations as a white person, when interacting with SLP, Mason-Hogans, and the COP participants, Hogan had to prioritize being transparent, self-aware, and candid about the limits of her own knowledge. Years of working with SNCC veterans in a respectful manner helped, but was not sufficient. Duke is still referred to as "the Plantation" by many of Durham's Black working-class residents, a reflection of its hiring and employment hierarchies. Some COH participants needed to know why Hogan was doing this work, how she had become a movement scholar, and what values drove her forward. She had to meet people where they were; she often found them filled with frank disbelief, skepticism, and sometimes a "No, we've tried this before; it doesn't work" perspective. Hogan and other scholars involved had to demonstrate, from the beginning of the COH process, specifically how they were opening up university and grant-funded resources to share power equally over budget, hiring decisions, who to invite, how to set up the room, how to staff the event, and how the histories would be treated once collected.

In specific terms, this meant that Hogan had to disrupt many university protocols, in which university faculty and staff are accustomed to making all the decisions and simply inviting community members to the research table. Disrupting these bureaucratic practices took time. Hogan and Mason-Hogans prioritized their internal communication and communication with SNCC partners to a degree that seemed inordinate to some university-based people. As one annoyed Duke colleague stated when we asked him to submit a supplementary justification for paying SLP team members for their pre-COH session work: "Why are you spending so much time before the COH to bring people together? Can't you just plan it, and then have them talk?" We had to write out additional written justifications for hiring videographers from outside the university, student workers from outside Duke, and in order to add a new (Black) catering team to the university's list of acceptable vendors. The longer processing time that it took to make sure our core team was culturally knowledgeable and focused on relationship rather than overall objective was central to our work, but to some staff and faculty within the university it seemed unnecessary, undermining the university's protocol and values of efficiency. Yet it was absolutely central: prioritizing the ethos of freedom movement participants, our candid relationships with them, and their ways of working over university procedures allowed us to build and maintain trust with COH participants. It was meaningful to Mason-Hogans and to other team members that Hogan used her position and relationship with the university to share resources in this way; it fostered trust and laid a foundation for transformative relationships to emerge.

With the three of us clear about our distinct roles, our limits, and our strengths, we felt free to approach the collection and preservation of freedom movement history through a justice lens. One way to live this was by making sure that Augusto and the SLP had "first among equals" input on budget, hiring, and content decision-making. A second way was to prioritize a more egalitarian approach to intellectual property via oral history consent forms.

Oral history consent forms are sometimes seen by oral historians as a routine procedure necessary at the beginning of an interview, a simple piece of paper to have signed, a box to check off the list. However, for us, consent forms served as lightning rods. They illuminated all the work our team had to do in the face of deeply frayed relationships of trust between the academy and freedom movement veterans. University members nationwide have abused these relationships of trust so routinely that many freedom movement veterans either refuse to share their story in the first place, or simply have a script that they are ready to impart to scholars, which they deploy without making an effort to expand upon what happened and why it happened. For example, while doing background research for the 2018 MFDP COH, Mason-Hogans traveled to Mississippi with young activists to gather research about the local community's role in the MFDP. Ms Flonzie Brown Wright, a legendary civil rights veteran from Jackson, was on Mason-Hogans's list to interview. When it was time to sign a consent form, Brown Wright gave voice to the mistrust between the academy and freedom movement people:

> I've done so many interviews with so many different individuals, groups, and organizations. There are times when I reread what has actually been written—sometimes it's not what I said. I just want to let you know that up front. Some veterans just stop doing interviews for the same reason. Because we give so much of our time and information. Many times we don't even hear back from the people who we have been so generous with. Certainly, I want to applaud you for documenting the history and the sacrifices that we went through. But then sometimes—I can just say the way it is for me—we are really taken advantage of … We contribute to whatever you are doing, and I have never even gotten a complimentary copy of the book. So, that does bother me; it makes me angry.

Mason-Hogans listened and then described the way in which our approach strove to be different. Brown Wright shared her experiences and provided crucial information. Normally, Mason-Hogans found the relationship between the university system and veteran activists so transactional that the veteran activists usually had a rote response, based on what had been asked before and their perception of the expected response scholars wanted from them. Our modified COH route promised a more accurate and in-depth knowledge-sharing.

How did we choose the topics for each COH? As our SLP–Duke team built the SNCC Digital Gateway, the SNCC activists on our team came to an important realization. At some of the most crucial turning points of their movement, outsiders had long defined SNCC's reality to the broader world. Fifty years later, for example, the vast majority of journalists, historians, and high school textbooks defined SNCC's 1966 call for "Black Power" as "anti-white," "Black supremacy," "reverse racism," and "apartheid." Why? SNCC people created the term "Black Power" but their perspectives had been suppressed. Instead, white journalists and scholars, deeply shaped by Jim Crow's narrow vision, had built these false narratives in the 1960s, and others followed. The 2016 COH gave high visibility to something almost totally missing from the public domain for the past half-century: the thinking of the SNCC veterans themselves about the value and impact of their 1966 call for Black Power. SNCC veterans such as Courtland Cox, Jennifer Lawson, and Bob Moses knew their co-workers had first called for Black Power in majority-Black Southern counties, where “one person, one vote” could lead to Black sheriffs, school boards, and tax assessors. By the 2010s, SNCC veterans felt that it was high time to define Black Power on their own terms (Galloway 2020; German 2020; Joseph 2014; Williams 2006). SNCC’s call for Black Power was a pro-democracy campaign in a white supremacist-ruled region.

Similarly, the SNCC veterans wanted to reassess and define for themselves their organization’s actions during the 1964 “Freedom Summer.” Between 1962 and 1964, as young activists they had encouraged over 80 000 Black Mississippians to register to vote. Most eligible Black voters were denied by the local county registrar. Over the summer of 1964, these youth and their adult allies in Mississippi formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, or MFDP. They documented all the ways the state denied eligible voters their rights, and set up a parallel party, the MFDP, to hold its own elections and register people to vote without the state’s oppressive Jim Crow barriers of paying poll taxes or taking literacy tests. When the national US Democratic Party would not recognize the MFDP even when it followed all the party rules, anyone watching could see the limits of US democracy (Dennis and Dennis 2022; Dittmer 1994; Hogan 2007; Holsaert et al. 2010; Payne 1995).

Setting the table also involved recruiting the right videographers for each session. Mason-Hogans took a great deal of intentionality in hiring Free Southern Media, a Black-led filmmaking collective who had documented current freedom movement activism in the South. The team of four people—three videographers and a fourth person to operate three digital audio devices to make sure all the voices and nonverbal exchanges in the room were recorded—attended a series of workshops led by members of the SLP–Duke team on the COH process, including strategies on how to listen and film in a way that respected the SLP’s process.

Augusto and Cobb were responsible for recruiting SNCC participants. They knew that some members of SNCC were wary of projects done with any predominantly white institution (PWI)–particularly in the South—given how often those universities used Black Southerners in their research without any direct involvement from or benefit to those communities. “We were always trying to think how we overcome those fears,” Augusto recalled. For the first COH session on Black Power, in 2016, Augusto felt that one-on-one conversations with various civil rights veterans were necessary. “We had to decide whether or not certain people would be invited to that first session or not, whether participation should be staggered, how to assure that no one’s voice would override those of others ... All those tricky decisions were worked out in a host of one-on-one conversations,” she reflected. Augusto did two rounds of telephone conversations with movement veterans to work through the sensitivities and concerns of the still-living people to whom this history was very important, but who might or might not participate in an actual COH.

While the SLP–Duke team had a plan for executing the COH sessions, we also needed to decide who should come to them. Members of SLP had participated in so many panels, workshops, and commemorative events with one another and other civil rights activists over the previous five decades that they had a finely tuned sense of how various SNCC veterans either worked well together or did not, shared the microphone or did not, and thus could plan, considering who would be able to contribute to a COH meaningfully and who would be better to interview one-on-one. “If you have X and Y persons in the room of a multiways discussion with men and women,” one SNCC veteran recalled, “people who had been through different kinds of tensions in the field as they were working, [SNCC veterans knew] how best to have a conversation." The SLP veterans on the SLP–Duke team had a sense that "we wanted disagreement, but we didn't want fisticuffs. We wanted people to be able to disagree frankly, but we didn't want monopoly." "Men soak up the air in a room," another recalled. "We were always thinking about the social and human dynamics for what would happen in a discussion of a lot of mixed people in the room, and ten [people] is a lot." The National Endowment for the Humanities grant provided for the collection of both kinds of oral histories: one-on-one and COH sessions. SLP members' insider knowledge about people's health also served as a guide for issuing invitations. "We're older people, not always in great health. To have us there for two days or two and a half days, we can't have an hour that's filled up with having one person [talk] or [only] acrimonious things." The resulting invitations to the COH sessions were thus imperfect, yet created with both insider (activists from SLP) and informed outsider (scholar) input.

Augusto also led us through the process of determining that each COH session would be closed to the public in order to promote candor and open exploration, and to discourage performing (even unconsciously) for an outside audience. In addition, in an environment where civil rights movement veterans widely saw Homeland Security agencies as ideological descendants of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), "open" environments were suspect. As one freedom movement veteran noted, "I always want to know, 'Who is in the room? Who is looking in?'" Yet Augusto, having worked at Brown University for three decades, knew that open events helped the university to publicize its mission. So, just as the originators of COH, Blight and Lang, did in their original sessions, the SLP–Duke team paired each closed COH session with a public panel. "The trade-off is the trust," Augusto shared. She and SNCC veteran Charlie Cobb "emailed every one of [the COH participants] to assure them of who would be in the [closed] room and explained who each person was. The history of how academics have used people's knowledge is not a good one. We had to keep the COH sessions closed to build trust."

Finally, a key part of table-setting was to send all participants the same 15 documents to create a common set of reference points and to prompt additional memories and responses. To create this dossier, Mason-Hogans hired five or six undergraduate and graduate students from Duke, North Carolina Central University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). Civil rights activists Bob Moses, Maria Varela, Judy Richardson, Charlie Cobb, Courtland Cox, Dave Dennis, Jennifer Lawson, and others called in to work with the student teams. Mason-Hogans led the weekly sessions, asking the SNCC veterans to help identify key documents and research terms to guide the student team. The veterans' review of literature, and their recall of accurate articles and writings of the day, was vital to this work. For instance, Moses asked the student team to find the exact photo of a car in Mississippi that had been riddled with bullets to provide context to what SNCC meant when they talked about racialized terror. This kind of detailed information, framing the COH sessions, gave SNCC veterans a way to critique inaccurate news coverage and previous scholarly framings. It also put into context the huge number of erroneous, slanted depictions and narratives of their work that suffused so much scholarship. The SNCC people guided Mason-Hogans and the students to the primary sources that stood out to them to set the stage for their work in the COHs. It was electrifying for the students working on the collaboration to have the freedom movement veterans at the center of the research process. It allowed them to interact directly with people who had made the history they were studying, and they worked hard to be able to report back positive results to the SLP members. As a result, the research team found many documents, photographs, and events that had not been archived before; they gathered a hyperlinked database of all the relevant documents (over 300 in total) over the course of the year leading up to each COH.

This research team, led by Mason-Hogans and staffed by students, also conducted preliminary interviews with movement veterans in a more traditional oral history format. Something that Mason-Hogans found useful here was a session which Hogan led with the group before the interviews began, encouraging them to focus their questions on something often missed in freedom movement oral histories where people often ask “What happened?” Hogan encouraged them to move beyond “what” happened, and ask about activists’ and organizers’ strategies, the “how” questions. “How did you get people to come to that march?” or “How did you help people figure out in the house meetings what they wanted the next steps to be?” Asking questions about strategy, with today’s youth activists’ challenges in mind, fostered the transfer of the organizing tradition from one generation to the next.

After all of this table-setting, Cobb and Augusto sent out invitations to participants. The invitation let them know that our grant would compensate them for their time and travel, and they would be asked to read the hard-copy dossier of 15 documents, with ongoing access to the 300+ item digital dossier for reference. A group of SLP veterans, Mason-Hogans, Hasan Jeffries, Emilye Crosby, and Hogan, selected which 15 documents from the over 300 collected would make up the smaller dossier. Mason-Hogans mailed each participant a hard copy six weeks prior to the COH session. Thus, through the mailed dossier and online digitized documents, all participants had access to extensive documentation on the issues under discussion. The dossier sometimes included their own memos, photographs, and reports from the 1960s, as well as those of others; subsequent writing on the issues of controversy that scholars and activists had published since; and lists of potential questions to be addressed. We made it clear that we expected everyone to be grounded in these materials and to come ready to speak, in detail and in collective deliberation, to the pivotal issues under examination.

AFTER COH: WHAT TO DO WITH THE COH VIDEO AND AUDIO MATERIAL

Once the sessions concluded, Mason-Hogans and Hogan sent them to a transcription service, corrected the transcripts, and in keeping with the COH ethos, sent the transcripts to all participants for feedback, spelling corrections, and clarification. SLP members took primary responsibility for the time-consuming jobs of encouraging COH participants to review and re-review, and making those edits. If a COH participant disagreed with the transcript, Hogan listened to the original recording and made a note about their response in the transcript. Hogan and Mason-Hogans then indexed the transcripts and deposited them in the Duke library. Editing the transcripts each time took nearly 12 months from start to finish because of the number of people who had to review the transcripts, plus the time it took our team to review and compile these edits. (Ahead of time, we did not plan for the amount of time and work this level of transcription preparation would take.)

After getting the transcripts, audio, and video material over to the library, SNCC Digital Gateway project manager Karlyn Forner and communications specialist Kaley Deal created 2–4 minute video excerpts of both the 2016 and 2018 sessions, ran them through the SDG’s editorial board for feedback and edits, and then made the clips of these sessions available online through the SDG.

The entirety of both transcripts, all the audio, and all of the video files of both the 2016 and 2018 COHs are available through the Duke University Libraries, and by 2023 will be on the SNCC Legacy Project website as well. We hope that all kinds of people will make use of these files going forward, but we are still not sure how best to publicize them and make them "findable" to activists and organizers.

UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES

We experienced three unexpected challenges as we implemented the COH. First, "sharing authority" and "sharing knowledge" between movement-based people and university-based people sounds good, and sounds easy in theory. We found in practice that both movement people and university-based people often reverted to university-based forms of knowledge production. SNCC people are exceptionally good at holding firm to their own movement-based expertise; however, many others in the movement defer to university-based experts. And university-based people are all too quick to accept that authority.

This led to our second, interrelated challenge: internalized deference. Movement-based people require more time than university, media, and nonprofit-based people are often used to giving in order to put their information into their own frameworks. They might need to meet multiple times prior to a formal COH in order to build their own framework for making meaning of their experiences. They might need to hear one another's memories to get outside of mainstream lenses for viewing these memories, and undoing decades of thought oppression. Such multiple, slow-paced, and seemingly repetitive stories might be experienced by university- or media-based people as excessively long. However, taking that time, moving at the pace of movement-based people, is absolutely critical to the emergence of movement frameworks for making sense of what happened and what it all means.

Finally, the key to everything working in a COH is the key team maintaining a "movement ethos," that is, prioritizing relationships with participants over university-based protocols, over university-based understandings of "how long a project should take," and over university values of efficiency. Movement people intuit with lightning speed when a university, media, or nonprofit-based person gives lip service to "appreciating elders" or wanting to "work with the community," then forces a movement person to fight to prove they belong, or to have to assert again and again that their truth is indeed legitimate; that their way of speaking, holding themselves, or asserting their authority is indeed distinct from and equally experientially valid as mainstream forms of knowledge-building and knowledge-sharing. It is essential to prioritize relationship over formal knowledge-building in what might seem like small interactions to mainstream people, such as developing non-extractive consent forms, placing the archive in community spaces as well as university ones, and in maintaining the relationship long after the formal project is completed.

CONCLUSION

A person might reasonably ask: Well, if the COH produces more accurate knowledge, as well as clarity and correction to the popular narrative about how the freedom movement occurred and who drove it forward, why don't methods like this get used more often? The answers we found are many. Often, currently active movement people do not have time or resources for this work. And trustworthy, patient, and self-knowledgeable university partners are hard to find. And it takes so much preparatory time that funders often get impatient and demand "more efficient" processes. Building and sharing knowledge within a movement ethos simply is quite distinct from long-established university grooves of knowledge production, and asserting them time and again takes persistence, determination, and clarity.

We are currently creating 2–4 minute clips of the COH gatherings. Along with our partners from the Movement for Black Lives, we highlight insights from SNCC movement veterans that are most relevant to activists working today on a whole range of rights: voting, education, immigration, LGBTQIA+, the movement to end mass incarceration and police violence, and others. We hope that these video and audio clips will be shared widely on social media, as well as within community meetings and other places where activists and organizers develop movement strategy.

And what if one does not have university backing? Or a significant grant? Or a well-established group such as SNCC to work with? Co-author Danita Mason-Hogans has engaged in just such a COH group since 2019 within her hometown of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Her work proves that the method can be adapted, but must be rooted in deep, respectful relationships rooted in reciprocity. She is working on a follow-up methods article to share her adaptation of the method for this context (Mason-Hogans 2021).

We have found some possible ways to move this method forward, but we would very much like to learn from others who try it. Please get in touch with us to let us know your experiences with it. Social movement knowledge is vital to the future of both planet and people.

NOTES

1. More on the background and importance of the MFDP later in the chapter.
2. The SLP is the SNCC Legacy Project, a nonprofit formed by the SNCC veterans in 2011 to share their stories more widely.

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