

# Labour research

*getting it done, getting it right*

**N**aledi and progressive labour policy researchers face a challenging task. We are expected to deliver sound, quality research, which is carried out in ways that are consistent with labour's political objectives. We are often confronted with strict time and budgetary constraints.

Quite frequently these goals can clash. Resolving tensions between them is difficult. Our research staff come from various traditions (including labour, community, or student organisations). Their background ensures that they have a high level of knowledge of labour, its problems, and how it operates as a movement. However, they have uneven research experience, and different perceptions of research methodologies.

Naledi decided to organise a formal research methods course for its researchers, which ran over six months. The course was also attended by union-based researchers, in line with our commitment to building capacity in the labour movement. It highlighted a number of fundamental issues about research that should be of interest to other organisations aligned to the labour movement, trade union-based researchers, as well as progressive research NGOs in general.

## **Research and politics**

There was universal agreement in our sessions that a large gap exists between

*Glenn Adler, Jeremy Daphne and Ravi Naidoo identify the challenges and point to some solutions to the issues facing progressive labour researchers.*

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research conducted in political environments – such as labour-linked NGOs like Naledi – and in universities. The starting point of our research is fundamentally political: to contribute to changing society. It is therefore concerned with questions of power.

This principle allowed us to differentiate what we do from much of the work conducted by people in academic environments. We do not conduct research for its own sake, or for advancing the boundaries of knowledge in a particular discipline. Our work may have these outcomes, but they are not the reason why it is done.

While this principle was endorsed by all, it did not in itself answer a host of other questions.

What do we mean by research? What is good research? If we can answer this last question, how do we live up to our definition, given the practical constraints that face us? Finally, how do we conduct critical research while functioning under a pro-labour banner?





*Research must be consistent with labour's objectives.*

## Discovery and truth

We began with a stark contrast between 'policy' and 'academic' research based on a document that advanced a very traditional and 'scientific' approach to academic work. This document used a number of terms to describe academic research: objectivity, neutrality, reliability, universalism and honesty. This stimulated considerable debate, elements of which threaded its way into much of the course. Academic work claims to be neutral, for example, but in fact it carries explicit and implicit political agendas.

Through discussion we found some measure of agreement with even a very 'scientific' definition of academic research. We began to clarify what is different about our work.

Research is fundamentally a process of intellectual production in which we discover things we don't already know. There is, however, a paradox here: we can only identify things as new on the basis of what we already know.

What separates research from other

kinds of activities – belief or faith, personal opinion, propaganda, a position paper or even political argument – is that research puts us in a position to challenge our expectations, to rule some out as mistaken, or false, and some as true. To do so requires evidence: we have to confront our expectations and assumptions with some body of facts that can tell us broadly whether our guesses are right or wrong.

Research entails identifying what you want to know – a research question. This may be generated by our comrades in the labour movement, by government, or by ourselves as researchers. In generating the question we also state our expectations – our guesses – about the likely answers to this question.

Asking a clear research question is a difficult intellectual task. It demands that we can translate this question into a researchable project; that our questions are focused enough so that they can be answered. It demands that we know the range of methods that are available for answering our questions, which methods





*Naledi workshop, March 1998.*

are appropriate in a particular context, and how to use these methods. Finally, it requires that we are able to produce data that enables us to answer the question one way or another.

In short, research entails knowledge of a series of techniques and the rules that guide their use. The credibility of the research will be enhanced to the extent that these rules are followed and are seen to be followed, as they enable others to judge the rigour of the work.

## **Naledi research**

This approach to research helps us to differentiate different kinds of activities undertaken at Naledi. If our aim is to answer a researchable question, we can do so through a careful literature review: it may be that our question has been adequately answered by one or more authors. It may also be the case that we have to generate the data ourselves through some sort of original research project. In almost all cases we will combine both of these activities

Either way, what we do differs from a simple accumulation of information. Our

purpose is to marshal the information to answer our research question. It also differs from a position paper, opinion or brief. As important as these may be, they usually do not entail the kinds of exercises identified here.

At a basic level there is little difference between what we do and what our colleagues in universities do.

Are we confronted with specific conditions in our context that do not confront other kinds of researchers?

## **Positionality**

Social research is never conducted in a vacuum. The researcher is engaged – consciously or otherwise – in a relationship with the people he/she is studying and those for whom the work is being done. This raises an issue that was discussed at length in our research course: positionality. Research concerns relations between human beings. It is, to a large extent, about power: the power of our claims as research 'experts' over people; the power of our clients over our agendas.

Where are we positioned? Our aim is to provide research that bolsters labour's



struggles. In our context, this really means bolstering COSATU's struggles. All our researchers have higher formal educational qualifications than most of those in whose name we conduct research. For most of us, English is our first language. This is not true of most of the labour movement. Furthermore, to the extent that we develop expertise as researchers, we become increasingly differentiated from our constituency.

These differences could have important implications that shape:

- the questions we prioritise;
- the ways we might address them;
- the way we present our work.

They can also affect levels of trust and credibility.

There are two main - and clearly linked - problems of positionality that grow out of our relationship with a powerful workers' movement. The first is that our arguments may acquire increased weight by virtue of their status as 'research' and our position as 'experts'. The second is that our findings may meet with disapproval because they are unpopular.

Problems of positionality are inevitable in all research work, but they can be addressed. We need to ensure that the demographic composition of progressive labour researchers in South Africa becomes more like the constituency it serves in terms of class origins, gender and race.

It is important that individual researchers understand and acknowledge positionality, and that research organisations have well formulated mechanisms and approaches for managing such issues.

## Researching for labour

If our position is pro-labour, how much room is there to conduct research that is critical of labour?

What is our responsibility to ourselves as politically committed professionals and intellectuals and to our constituency if our research yields findings that run counter to the organisation's policies or the movement's orientations? What if our findings contradict our own positions? Should the researcher manipulate the research to bolster policy; or let the chips fall where they may, even if this means 'biting the hand that feeds us'? Or should we find diplomatic ways to state unpalatable truths?

Researchers must not be blindly obedient to the latest policies or avoid bringing difficult issues to light. If we do this, research findings will quickly lose credibility, even amongst our allies in the labour movement. On the other hand, findings could be ignored and our expertise not sought because they run counter to existing policy or powerful vested interests.

What is of paramount importance is the credibility of research processes and outcomes. While the political impact of the research will vary, the quality of the research must not.

A related challenge is Naledi's role in policy-making. Is our role to influence policy; or is it rather to assist COSATU to develop its own ideas, or is it both? Where does the policy research role end? A practical issue is the close links between policy research and negotiation processes. On occasion policy researchers have been drawn into negotiation structures such as at Nedlac. This can result in complications. A research organisation's operational scope needs to be clearly demarcated.

## Funders

Unlike many organisations, Naledi has not yet experienced pressure from funders. As our contract research increases and we



accept funding from new sources, funder pressure could become an issue. Will funders – private foundations, multi- or bi-lateral aid organisations, the South African state – attempt to exert control over what we research and how? Forms of control could well be attempted. While organisations must be scrupulously accountable financially to their funders, this should not influence the nature or quality of service to their constituencies. Organisational and political independence must be maintained, even if it means losing a funding opportunity.

### **Balancing quality and time**

In the initial sessions of our course, most Naledi staff shared a number of beliefs about how our research should be conducted. Many emphasised the importance of qualitative over quantitative research. All stressed the importance of participatory research methods. We are all committed to the principle of capacity building, empowering workers and union officials to take increasing control over the research agenda and the research itself.

There are constraints on our ability to achieve these aims. With policy work, time is a constant factor. Much of Naledi's work relates to short-term urgent requests. There is a constant tension between 'getting it done' and 'getting it right'.

The tension between our ideals and the time constraints imposed by our constituency is inescapable. It need not, however, mean that quality is fundamentally compromised. Work needs to be done on time, but it also needs to match an acceptable, not an ideal, standard. Balancing these goals means finding appropriate ways to shape our research designs to fit our circumstances, and finding a suitable mix between time and quality.

At the very least, it means airing these

issues on a regular basis. Such discussions will help us to identify collectively what we mean by 'acceptable quality'. They will help us find practical ways to learn from our experiences. They will also provide opportunities to induct new researchers into the opportunities and problems of working in our milieu.

Working under pressure will always be a dominant characteristic of policy research, and researchers need to adapt accordingly. This includes working faster and with greater rigour, and active networking. This in turn necessitates excellent project management skills.

We discussed being forthright in identifying the limits of the claims that can be made on the basis of our findings. This is standard practice in research, and – if the research has any merit at all – will build a reader's confidence in our results.

Most researchers were wary of spending large amounts of their time as managers of other researchers. One possible solution, which will bolster internal capacity, is to ensure that different kinds of research activities, including research management, are evenly distributed amongst staff. All staff should be involved in both short- and long-term research, particularly the latter where they can be doing work close to their interests and where they simultaneously develop their quantitative and qualitative research skills.

### **Whose standards?**

Research, we learned, always happens in a particular research community which defines acceptable norms and standards of research work. This community is defined by our constituency, by our funders, by ourselves, and by our colleagues in other research organisations. To some extent what constitutes research is what this community defines it to be. The



community may define:

- ☐ what questions are worth answering;
- ☐ how the research should be conducted;
- ☐ the rules that will be used to judge the quality of the research;
- ☐ the ethics of our relationship with research subjects;
- ☐ matters of intellectual freedom and accountability.

In an academic setting, this community is often well-defined. In scholarly research communities' norms and standards of research are subjects of considerable dispute. But scholarly communities also possess the means to address such disputes: formal research courses and a system of supervision (both of which induct a scholar into the practice of research); research oversight committees in departments and faculties; scholarly conferences and workshops where work is presented and subject to criticism; and the process of peer review for publication in journals and books.

For research NGOs like Naledi, there are fewer formal processes to discuss research norms and standards. The diverse and dispersed nature of NGO-based researchers tends to act as a barrier to sharing our research experiences and discussing common problems.

### Building a community

These problems are not unique to Naledi, and we cannot solve them on our own.

Training and ongoing skills development in research method are critical issues. We need to develop a broader progressive labour research community where those who daily address these issues can begin sharing their thoughts and developing common solutions. One step in this direction was



Researchers are often different from those they serve. II

taken in June 1997, when Naledi hosted a workshop for researchers from labour-linked NGOs, unions and universities to discuss their research programmes. Vast and often heated disagreements on approaches to research emerged at the workshop. Participants concluded that there is a need for further meetings where they can raise principled and practical matters of common interest. Such a venture is crucial to building the research infrastructure that could begin to address collective norms and standards appropriate to our milieu. ★

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