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*Research Note:*

## **Giving Back in Solidarity**

**Harmony Goldberg**

The Graduate Center  
City University of New York, 365, Fifth Ave  
New York, NY 10016, UNITED STATES  
[harmonygoldberg@gmail.com](mailto:harmonygoldberg@gmail.com)

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I am first and foremost a political thinker and an activist intellectual. It is true that I am a graduate student who is currently writing up my dissertation, which is focused on the organizing efforts of Domestic Workers United (DWU), a grassroots organization of domestic workers in New York City. And I may one day be a professor. But I am also an activist who spends much of her time helping to build social justice organizations around the country, primarily organizations that are based among low-wage and immigrant workers. I am also a trainer who helps grassroots organizers understand the bigger picture behind the day-to-day issues around which they struggle, and I am a writer who focuses on helping social justice movements to think more clearly and strategically about their work. I have always thought of my intellectual work as “playing my specific role” within a broader strategic division of labor in the movements of which I am a part, as “doing my part” to move a collective political vision forward. “Giving back” has not been the way that I have thought about my contributions to the communities with whom I conducted my research, perhaps because it seems to imply a transactional relationship between researcher and subject rather than joint work towards a shared political end. Regardless, it can be helpful to use this frame to interrogate the ways in which my research did or did not contribute to the individual women workers with whom I did my interviews and to DWU as an organization.

My field research with DWU has been a non-traditional mix of formal research and direct practical support for their organizing work. I did volunteer work with DWU for several years before I decided to do my research with them. When I first moved to New York City, DWU asked me to develop a series of political education workshops to help their leaders learn about the history of the domestic work industry in the United States and to understand the role that domestic work plays in the broader economy. While I brought a certain amount of historical knowledge and political analysis to those trainings, the ladies who went through those workshops taught me far more than I taught them: about the histories of the nations from which they had migrated, about the challenges of navigating the downward social mobility that they faced when leaving their often respected professions in their homelands in order to take up domestic work in the United States and about the ways in which domestic workers—who have always been dismissed as “unorganizable” by the traditional union movement—went about building collective power.

At first, I hoped to use my dissertation research to help DWU to publish a popular book about the conditions in the domestic work industry, sort of a challenge to the then-popular film, *The Nanny Diaries*, which romanticized domestic work by focusing on a fairy-tale story of the white au pairs who populate the highest tiers of the industry. As time went on, new political needs came into view for me, and my focus changed. A new national federation of independent workers’ organizations, called the Excluded Worker Congress, formed in order to advance the interests of the many sectors of low-wage workers who are excluded from federal labor rights and employment protections. Many of these organizations were using similar organizing methodologies and tactical repertoires, and they were facing parallel challenges in their attempts to build their membership to scale and to win significant gains for their members. Seeing these patterns, I decided to use my research with DWU, a flagship organization in the field of independent worker organizing, as a vehicle for critical reflection on the innovations and limits of existent models for worker organizing.

For many years, DWU had been involved in an ambitious campaign to pass a piece of state-wide legislation called the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, which reversed the decades-long exclusion of domestic workers from labor rights and protections. They won that fight in the months before I started my research. I decided to focus my research on the new organizing strategies they developed in order to adapt to the new political terrain that they had created through their historic victory: How would they manage enforcement in such a decentralized industry? What new strategies would they develop to fight for higher standards, now that they had won equal inclusion in the relatively low floor of worker protections that we have in the United States? My field work had two primary components: life history interviews with DWU’s worker-leaders and participant observation, which in my case meant helping DWU to build a new program to train its worker leaders to serve as worker rights educators and to build local support meetings for domestic workers in the neighborhoods around New York City.

We spent many long hours planning and training more than a dozen leaders, who then went out to various neighborhoods around the city—from the Upper West Side and

Tribeca to Park Slope and Sunset Park—to tell their fellow workers about their newly-won rights. The program was a partial success, with local groups of workers starting to have regular meetings in the high-income Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca and in the working class, predominantly Latino neighborhood of Sunset Park. But, by and large, it proved difficult for the organization and its leaders to carry out the kind of large-scale outreach that was necessary for effective enforcement of the Bill of Rights. A major theme in my dissertation is reflection on the challenges facing worker organizers when they win struggles for equal inclusion in established standards and enter the realms of enforcement and the fights for standards above the minimum. So, in this aspect of my research, my giving back included both my volunteer work to help develop the program and my work to draw out and capture the lessons from their work in order to contribute towards the broader project of developing a model of worker organizing that can address the needs and experiences of low-wage workers. Most of the conclusions of my research are not mine alone; they were developed in dialogue with dozens of worker leaders and organizers whose innovative thinking constantly pushed me to think more clearly and creatively. So my giving back consisted of consolidating and broadcasting their innovative thinking so that other worker organizers will be able to draw lessons from their experiences.

The other component of my research was to conduct life history interviews with 15 worker-leaders. My experience in these interviews reflected the feminist insight that the act of women sharing their stories can be a powerful and healing experience, political in its own right. Our interviews provided a space for workers to talk through the challenges of adjusting to their new class positions upon entering the United States, their daily experiences of disrespect from their employers and their deep pride about their work to raise children and tend to elders. Many of the workers appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories, to reflect on the trajectory of their lives and to have someone believe that they were valuable enough to document. But I do not believe that providing that space for story sharing and reflection was an example of me giving back. The primary act of “giving” was theirs. They gave me the tremendous personal privilege of hearing their stories, and in so doing, they provided the overwhelming majority of the rich data set from which I built my dissertation. On one level, all I could do in return was to give them a small stipend and a transcription of their stories to share with their families. On a deeper level, I did give them a space to share their stories, and that sharing meant a great deal to all of us. But I believe that the fact that this space was so meaningful was more a reflection of the ways in which their stories are often discounted, ignored, and marginalized in this society, rather than an expression of my generosity or thoughtfulness. There is indeed something profoundly humanizing in the act of sharing your life story, of witnessing another human being’s struggles and triumphs, of affirming each other’s voices and experiences. But I do not believe that treating my subjects like the powerful human beings that they are should be considered an example of me giving back to them, even if it served them well in some way. I believe the complicated dynamics explored here illustrate some of the tensions inherent in the frame of giving back.

Very early in the process of conducting these interviews, I realized that the workers' transnational experiences of class would necessarily be a central theme in my research. The challenges they faced in navigating downward social mobility resounded again and again as a central theme in our interviews, and I came to understand that it was playing a subterranean role in DWU's struggle to develop a new organizing model, at times reflecting workers' efforts to redeem the loss of their past social status. For example, the transition from being a respected teacher in their nation of origin to being a degraded domestic worker in the United States manifested in individualistic approaches to personal advancement that cut against more collective forms of struggle. These complicated and seemingly contradictory dynamics of class are not often explicitly recognized by the broader public or sometimes even by the worker organizers who are focused on building collective power in these low-wage industries. This oversight contributes to an oversimplification in societal understandings of these workers' lives and struggles and this reduces them to a sort of victimization narrative.

By pulling out the differences between the experiences of, for example, a bilingual Guatemalan nanny who came from an upper middle-class family who was herself raised by domestic workers and a monolingual Mexicana housecleaner who came from peasant origins, we can challenge the societal tendency to see domestic workers as a monolithic group or to victimize them. Instead, we can see them as human beings with a range of complicated, painful, and beautiful life trajectories. Telling their stories is one way I hope to give back by helping to fulfill a hope expressed by many workers: that society will stop reducing them to the servant status and start to value the range of skills and experiences that they bring to their work from their previous experiences in their nations of origin. This broader perspective can also contribute towards a more expansive method of worker organizing that embraces the full life experiences of workers rather than focusing narrowly on one moment in their lives and on their experiences in the workplace alone. The low-wage workers' movement would benefit from a more integrative model that does not shy away from the complexities and contradictions that emerge from the complicated dynamics of workers' real lives. Contributing towards the development of that model is another way that I hope to give back.

There are a few lessons that I draw from these experiences. First, giving back cannot erase differentials of power and privilege between academics and the communities with whom we conduct our research, on either individual or structural levels. In fact, some forms of giving back can actually strengthen those differentials, particularly if they reflect paternalistic dynamics of patronage or liberal approaches to charity. But even the most intentional attempts to give back do not erase the dynamics of privilege. No matter how much I treat my research participants with respect and no matter how much my writing helps to advance the broader project of low-wage worker organizing in the United States, I am still a white woman who is drawing on these immigrant women of color's experiences of exploitation and struggle in order to earn an advanced degree that will give me a much wider range of life opportunities than they can access. It is important that we accept those kinds of uncomfortable realities, with all of their attendant guilt and discomfort. That kind of acceptance allows us to treat our research participants with the dignity that any human being deserves. And it helps us to be more intentional about

making sure that our work challenges the structural inequalities that lead to these interpersonal dynamics of power and privilege.

Second, when we are thinking about giving back, we need to think through the differences between giving back to our individual research participants and giving back in more collective or community-based forms. When we focus on individual methods of giving back, we run the risk of falling into the dynamics of liberal guilt and charity, which can ultimately reinforce the marginalization of our participants and help to maintain societal perceptions of their victimization. While it is absolutely crucial to respect the individual humanity of our research subjects and to be respectful, open, and generous towards them (in the way that we should in any of our personal relationships), I do not believe that represents a form of giving back. Rather, it should be an assumed standard of conduct. I believe that we need to bring a greater level of intentional awareness to the collective forms of giving back; these forms can help to challenge the structural inequalities that shape the power imbalances between researchers and their subjects.

To the extent possible, these collective forms of giving back should enable the active participation and empowerment of the communities with whom we are working. This helps us to challenge the possibilities of being paternalistic or having a charity mentality. In my work, I sought to give back by drawing on the experiences of one workers' organization to suggest models that can be shared with other workers' organizations. There are endless ways in which intellectual work can help to build social movements that express the needs and visions of the populations with whom we do our work. Movements need political training, historical documentation, critical reflection, and long-term visioning. If we are humble about our role and grounded in organizing efforts led by those who are directly impacted by the problems we study, we can help to address some of those needs, sometimes through our own individual work as intellectuals and at other times by creating spaces for collective reflection.

At the same time, there are no pre-given answers for what form that collective giving back should take. We have to develop those answers in intentional and explicit dialogue with the communities with whom we are working. At the same time, we have to recognize that the communities in which we work are not monolithic. As in any community, there are important internal stratifications of power and privilege as well as significant personal and political differences. These differences may lead to differences of opinion about our work. In my research, I had close relationships of collaboration, joint thinking, and mutual leadership development with many worker-leaders and organizers, but I also had struggles with several others. It is my opinion that engaging in honest struggle with workers and challenging them to be stronger leaders is a crucial part of treating them as full human beings. All of these dynamics were laden with power and privilege, and they were also political struggles over the best process for building worker power. To navigate such dynamics well, we need a clear sense of our own underlying principles, a deep appreciation of our research participants' humanity and a commitment to shared dialogue and struggle.

Finally, we should endeavor to give back not only in practical ways while we are in the field, but also through the ideas and arguments that we advance through our written work. Many academics are concerned about projecting an appearance of objectivity and neutrality in their work and in so doing, they either remain neutral to the communities with whom they conducted their research or even do them active harm. Leaving aside the discussion of the profoundly non-neutral ways in which academic neutrality is defined, we are not giving back in an authentic way if we ultimately place our individual careers over the interests of these communities. In my opinion, that stance of neutrality can nullify the significance of any individual aspects of giving back that we do in the field because it ultimately undermines the integrity of whatever human relationships we built.

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