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Negotiating scholar-activism at the intersection of structure and agency

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A scholarly quest for meaning

Negotiating scholar-activism at the intersection of structure and agency

FARZANA BASHIRI | DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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A NOTE BY THE AUTHOR

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a scholarly, and perhaps reflective, space for understanding the political engagement of scholars in driving societal change. In a world overwhelmingly challenged by deep-rooted injustices, many academics feel compelled to reconsider their own roles, as well as those of their institutions, in perpetuating or contesting such injustices.

This thesis investigates the intersection between scholars' agency and the structural conditions within which their practices and experiences are embedded. I demonstrate how these agential practices and structural conditions can manifest, and how scholars negotiate between them. My hope is that this work can contribute to ongoing scholarly and societal debates about the world we wish to imagine, and the pathways toward achieving it.

Farzana Bashiri

A NOTE BY THE ILLUSTRATOR OF THE COVER

Working on this project inspired many images for me, but the most prominent was the ancient myth in which the young Athenian, Theseus, begins his journey to confront the monster dwelling at the heart of a vast labyrinth — an abomination that, by order of King Minos, feeds on Athenian youth.

To enter this labyrinth, from which no one had ever returned, Theseus receives a ball of thread from Ariadne, offered out of love and companionship, guiding his way in and back. Thus, after facing and defeating the beast, he finds the path to return from the immense maze.

In this project, the scholar-activist reminded me of Theseus and his heroic journey: drawing not only on ideals and convictions but also on the support and bonds received from community, the scholar in search of deeper meaning is compelled to step into the labyrinth of enduring structures and confront the beast of struggle.

Samaneh Rahmani Jarfi

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A scholarly quest for meaning

A scholarly quest for meaning

Negotiating scholar-activism at the intersection of structure and agency

Farzana Bashiri

LUND UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Universities, operating at the intersection of state, market, and civil society, are increasingly called upon to address urgent global challenges, such as climate change, inequalities, and social injustice. This has given rise to hybrid roles for scholars, ranging from public intellectuals to policy advisers and academic entrepreneurs. Among these roles, scholar-activism stands out by explicitly aligning scholarship with political struggle, often stirring controversy. It raises pressing questions about the role of scholars in social struggles and the balance between academic legitimacy and social responsibility.

Scholar-activism may be defined as the mobilization of academic capacities in support of transformative, counter-hegemonic social change. It embraces the political and normative dimensions of scholarship and is rooted in long-term engagement with movements, community organizations, and campaigns. However, in practice, the concept is fluid and contested, shaped by local, institutional, and socio-political contexts.

This thesis investigates the diverse meanings, practices, and tensions of scholar-activism. It consists of four studies: two literature reviews and two empirical studies from Sweden and South Africa. Drawing on a political sociology of science and critical realism, it demonstrates, first, the practices of scholar-activism within teaching, research, and collaboration. Second, it highlights the underlying structures that enable or constrain scholar-activism, including geopolitical and historical contexts, disciplinary norms, governance structures, and dominant epistemic regimes. Finally, it illustrates the internal and social negotiations that mediate between structure and agency, namely mobilizing emancipatory motivations, engaging criticality, navigating legitimacy, and negotiating trust and solidarity.

This thesis reveals not only the ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding the meaning and boundaries of scholar-activism but also how structural realities—geopolitical, institutional, and disciplinary—shape those ambiguities. It demonstrates that activism does not emerge as a fixed role but as a dynamic negotiation at the intersection of agency and structure. By applying a political sociology of science lens, it shows the value of combining constructivist and realist insights. Furthermore, by extending the knowledge field beyond Global North contexts, the thesis offers a richer, contextually sensitive understanding of what it means to make scholarship matter.

Key words: scholar-activism, academic activism, critical realism, structure, agency, reflexivity, Sweden, South Africa

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Farzana Bashiri

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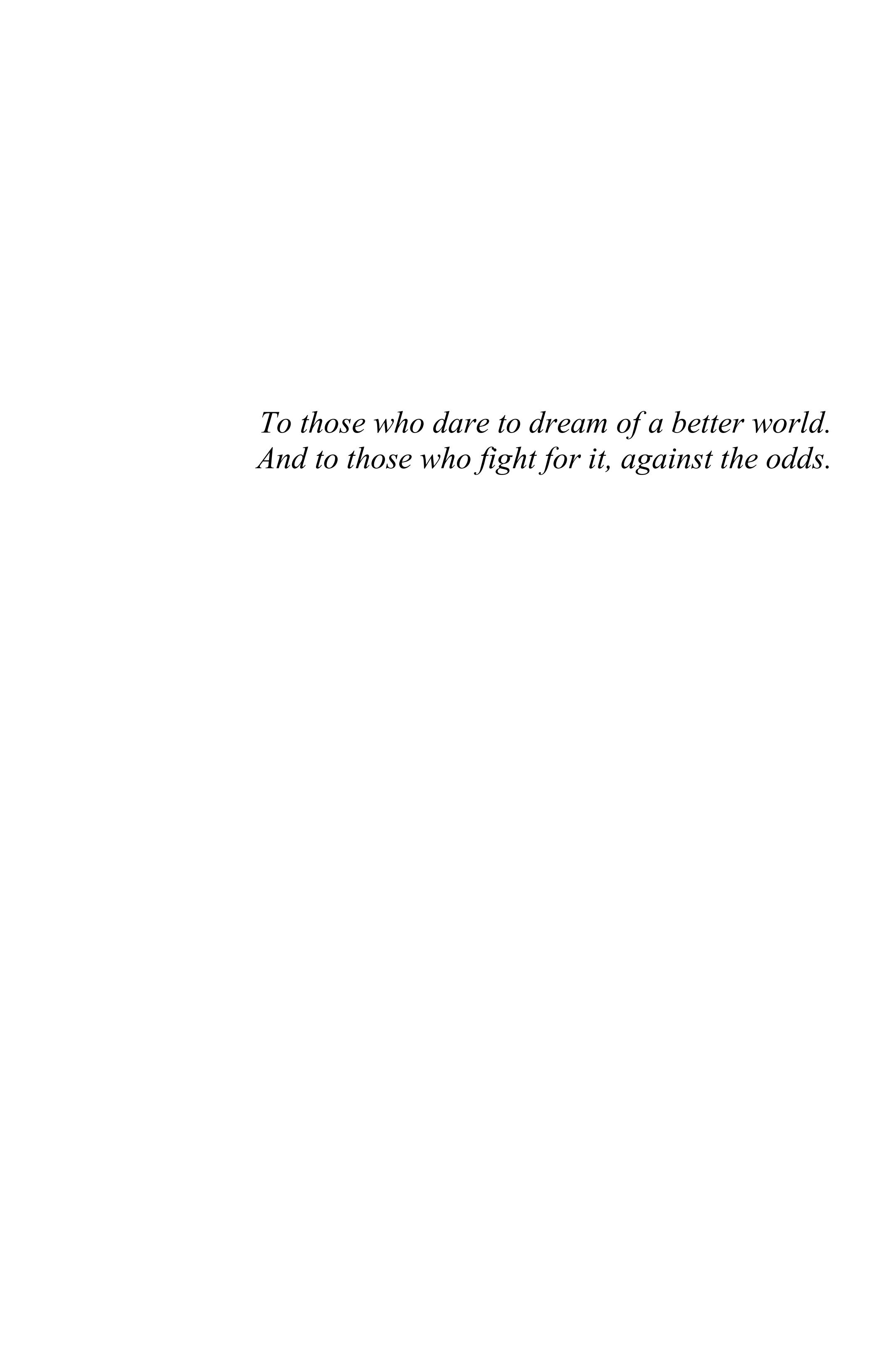

To those who dare to dream of a better world.
And to those who fight for it, against the odds.

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miss you deeply. I hope I have made you proud. I know I am proud to have been your daughter. And Maman, you made me who I am. I wouldn't be here without your tireless efforts to feed us and hold our family together. I am sorry that life was not always kind to you. Sometimes I imagine you in another life, as a DJ – I know you'd be amazing at that. But please know, I am proud of you in this life too.

To my second family in Babol, who gave me a home full of kindness. Baba Ali, thank you for supporting the construction of my wooden office in the garden, and Maman Zobi, I will never forget that on the very first day of my Ph.D., while I was in a meeting at noontime, the door of my wooden office quietly opened, and a tray of warm food was passed through. Thank you!

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List of papers

Paper I

Bashiri, F., Perez Vico, E., & Hylmö, A. (2025). Scholar-activism as an object of study in a diverse literature: preconditions, forms, and implications. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1-14.

Paper II

Bashiri, F. (2024). Conceptualizing Scholar-Activism through Scholar-Activist accounts. In *Innovation, technology and knowledge management* (pp. 61–97). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-48799-6_4

Paper III

Bashiri, F., Hylmö, A., & Perez Vico, E. (2025). Am I an activist? Making sense of scholar-activism in Swedish academic environments. *Unpublished manuscript.*

Paper IV

Bashiri, F. (2025). Enabling and constraining conditions for scholar-activism: Insights from South Africa. *Unpublished manuscript.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Why study scholar-activism?

To explain why, I begin with a key moment in my research. During a demonstration against South Africa's energy provider over its unjust energy policies, I heard a trade union leader declare through a megaphone: "You don't need to be a scientist to know that we have an abundance of solar energy. We need publicly owned solar energy, and this can alleviate the energy crisis in South Africa!" His claims, rightfully, needed no further scientific proof. I was there in a role of support and observation. As I walked with the crowd, just behind two prominent scholar-activists (see Figure 1 for visual inspiration), I found myself wondering: what does the presence of these academics mean for this struggle?

Figure 1. Walking behind scholar-activists Trevor Ngwane (left) and Patrick Bond (right)
The photo was taken in a protest in Soweto, South Africa, by the author on March 20, 2024.

As I continued to ponder, I realized this is not a new question. Activism has long shaped the work of scholars across disciplines and throughout history. From economists to anthropologists and natural scientists, academics have actively sought to transform practices, systems, and policies (Calhoun, 2008). When I posed this question to Siphiwe Mbatha, the South African community activist, he replied: "We need them in our struggles. With them there, it gives our march or our cause much weight …"

Scholar-activism can be understood as a way of leveraging academic status, platforms, and resources for social change (Derickson & Routledge, 2015). Yet scholars also assume many other roles that draw on their academic capacities to address societal challenges. Positioned at the intersection of academia and the public, political, and commercial spheres, scholars act as policy advisers, knowledge brokers, and academic entrepreneurs, among others. However, scholar- or academic-activism seems to take its own unique form, carrying its own specific tensions and implications. To illustrate this, I turn to three vantage points: theoretical, institutional, and social.

Theoretically, scholar-activism stands out among other forms of academic engagement because it is explicitly and openly political (Chatterton et al., 2010; Young et al., 2010), often links with progressive movements and social justice goals (Skinner et al., 2015; de Beer, 2015), and aims to amplify the voices of marginalized communities (Gray, 2023; Chetty, 2023). It is often described as working "from below" (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021) and is argued to be institutionally precarious (Rangel, 2020; Skinner et al., 2015), in contrast to roles such as policy advisers or academic entrepreneurs, which tend to be rather institutionally valorized. Yet ambiguities remain around deeper conceptual properties of scholar-activism and its substance (Barnett, 2021). Is a scholar-activist someone who simply writes critical content? Or someone who signs petitions and publishes op-eds? Can scholar-activism be characterized by specific practices, such as protests, civil disobedience, or policy advising, or is it better understood in terms of how controversial, transgressive, and boundary-crossing it becomes (Rangel, 2020; Temper et al., 2019)? Research suggests that such conceptual uncertainties act as barriers for many academics who might otherwise engage more meaningfully in activism (Dablander et al., 2024).

In the literature, scholar-activism is often described as a "dual role," in which academics attempt to "combine scholarship and activism" (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021, p. 11). This duality highlights the tensions that arise from seemingly conflicting norms and logics: one the one hand, academic ideals of impartiality and neutrality; on the other hand, activist commitments to political interests and partisanship (Temper et al., 2019; Hale, 2006). Developing a coherent self-conception as both a credible and responsible scholar within contemporary

academia can therefore be complex and ambivalent. As constitutional scholar Adrienne Stone (2023) observes: “The demands on scholars are complex. We must be humble, disciplined, self-aware and independent, but at the same time we must write productively and influentially and, increasingly, show real-world ‘impact.’”

For universities as public institutions, scholar-activism is a critical issue, especially in democratic societies, because they must respond to politically charged debates within their walls. Academic activism exposes the tensions in universities as both sites of free inquiry and as socially embedded institutions. Although debates over the ideal relationship between academia and activism are far from settled (Isopp, 2015; Heinich, 2023), activism continues to raise emotionally and morally charged demands that universities cannot ignore. Daniel Gordon, in his recent book on academic freedom, argues that activism is *“an unresolvable issue”* in *“the modern university,”* partly because many academic fields that have emerged in the past several decades, such as Black Studies, Women studies, and Environmental Studies, are political in nature (Gordon, 2022, p. 65).

In Sweden, recent waves of climate justice activism have sought to re-politicize environmental debates (Thörn & Svenberg, 2016), challenging established mechanisms of responsibility within universities (e.g., Scientist Rebellion, n.d.). Similarly, pro-Palestine activism has sparked campus mobilization and calls for engagement, questioning institutional neutrality and compelling universities to clarify their positions (e.g., Uppsala Declaration or petition by Malmö University students). Many scholars have responded to such calls by mobilizing academic platforms and actively participating in activism. Yet even in countries such as Sweden, with a high level of academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2024), universities struggle to interpret this principle when faced with political activism in academia. A recent government-commissioned report on academic freedom in Swedish higher education highlighted how institutions struggle to respond to situations when activism generates tensions around the exercise of academic freedom (UKÄ, 2024). As these tensions persist, universities must find ways to negotiate and manage them, since they touch directly on the democratic and social roles of these institutions.

Lastly, scholar-activism is a socially relevant question. The discussion around it cannot be separated from the broader role of science in society. Over the past few decades, science has been increasingly called upon to demonstrate *societal impact* and to respond to urgent challenges, such as climate change, inequality, and global health crises. The growing urgency and complexity of these challenges have pushed many scholars to move beyond the traditional confines of science and academia (Rotmans & Loorbach, 2009; Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). Frameworks such as Mode 2 knowledge production and the Triple and Quadruple Helix models emphasize that science should be socially relevant, application-oriented,

transdisciplinary, and embedded in collaboration with government, industry, and civil society (Nowotny et al., 2003; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). These frameworks position academia as a key player in addressing pressing societal needs.

It is in this context that some scholars argue engagement should go further. The gap between scientific understanding of urgent issues and the inadequacy of societal responses had led many to advocate for explicitly activist forms of engagement (Contu, 2020; Boda et al., 2022). After all, activism has historically been a powerful engine of social change (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Temper et al., 2019). Proponents of scholar-activism highlight the moral and political responsibility of scholars in the face of crises (Derickson & Routledge, 2015). As one academic in South Africa once told me: "When you have hungry students coming to the classroom, it is not a choice to be an academic-activist or not."

While scholar-activism appears as one possible extension of socially engaged and responsible scholarship, the merger of scholarship and activism remains socially contested. Some caution that activist engagement risks compromising core scientific norms of autonomy, impartiality, and truth-seeking (Merton, 1973; Cofnas et al., 2018). Critics have argued that society "needs to be protected from ideological activism at universities" (Enkvist, 2021), suggesting that political interference may undermine science's credibility and authority in public debates and democratic deliberation. Such concerns reflect broader anxieties about the potential for science to be contaminated by interests beyond truth-seeking, similar to worries in relation to close ties to business, the military, or policy actors.

Against this backdrop, this thesis seeks to explore scholar-activism in contemporary academia and society. Studies on scholar-activism can enrich debates about the role of universities in democracy and help institutions better understand the hidden tensions and pressures that academics face when addressing urgent and politically charged issues. Such studies can help us to better understand the conceptual ambiguities around scholar-activism and illuminate how scholars navigate constraining conditions while cultivating enabling environments. In what follows, I outline how this thesis contributes to these debates and addresses existing gaps in knowledge.

1.2. Positioning the thesis: gaps, aims, questions

To position this thesis, it is necessary first to consider how scholar-activism has been conceptualized in the literature. Although scholars have long participated in social movements (Moore, 2008), the study of scholar-activism itself has only

recently begun to take shape. Different strands of literature conceptualize activism in diverse ways: as a mode of knowledge production that challenges epistemic hierarchies (Richter et al., 2020; Barnett, 2021), as the co-creation of knowledge with communities and social movements through participatory approaches (Chatterton et al., 2010; Gray, 2023), as emancipatory and politically-oriented pedagogy (DeMeulenaere & Cann, 2013; Gordon, 2020), or as collaboration between academics and activist organizations (Cox, 2015; Contu, 2020). Despite this diversity, the field lacks a shared understanding of what scholar-activism entails (Lennox & Yıldız, 2020) and seldom engages with established theoretical traditions in science and higher education studies.

Research on scholar-activism is dispersed across fields such as education, geography, and sociology (Quaye et al., 2017; Lennox & Yıldız, 2020; as further demonstrated in Paper I). While fields such as Science and Technology Studies (STS), sociology of science, and science policy have traditionally examined the interplay between science and politics/policy, scholar-activism remains relatively under-explored from the perspective of these fields. Within STS, existing works typically investigate instances where academics and activists are regarded as distinct roles, with relatively few studies addressing the combined identity of scholar-activists who embody both roles simultaneously (Moore, 2008). Examples include investigations into the influence of social movements on scientific agendas in research on sexual orientation (Waidzunas, 2013), genetic toxicology (Frickel, 2004), and AIDS (Epstein, 1995), as well as studies of activists' self-experimentation with different substances and treatments (Jansky, 2024; Söderberg, 2023).

In science policy and innovation studies, vigorous empirical and theoretical work has developed frameworks to describe the science-society relationship, often assuming that universities play a crucial role in delivering societal value by driving economic growth and producing policy-relevant knowledge (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Nowotny et al., 2003). However, these studies rarely address university-society relationships geared toward activism (an exception is the debate on "politics of directionality" in Stirling (2024)). While these fields provide important context for understanding more radical forms of academic engagement, they have less systematically explored scholar-activism, a phenomenon of significance for the core questions these fields aim to address.

Against this backdrop, there are several specific gaps and opportunities that inform the focus of this thesis: 1) Much of the existing research relies on self-reported narratives, which limits systematic and rigorous empirical understanding. Nevertheless, synthesizing these accounts offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of scholar-activists. 2) There is considerable conceptual ambiguity, as scholarship on scholar-activism is dispersed across multiple, often disconnected

disciplines, resulting in terminological confusion and fragmented understanding. 3) There is a predominance of research from the Global North that restricts transnational perspectives, leaving insights from the Global South under-explored. 4) The limited study of scholar-activism within the sociology of science constitutes a notable research gap, particularly considering the field's rich theoretical resources for examining such questions.

Recent literature, however, show an increased scholarly interest in addressing some of these knowledge gaps. For example, large-scale surveys and interview studies highlight the uncertainties scientists face when attempting to reconcile professional norms with activist commitments, particularly regarding role identity and legitimacy (Dablander et al., 2024; Finnerty et al., 2024). Other contributions examine how academics negotiate ambiguity within institutional contexts, for instance, in relation to university impact agendas (de Jong & Balaban, 2022). Together, these studies highlight that contemporary scholars must navigate the boundaries between their activist commitments and academic legitimacy. They further illustrate that scholar-activism often unfolds at the intersection of individual agency (the choices and actions of scholars) and the structural conditions of academia and the broader society, which both enable and constrain such engagements. This dissertation investigates this contested intersection and asks: *How can scholar-activism be understood at the intersection of agency and structures?* This broad question is addressed through three specific research questions:

I What practices constitute scholar-activism?

II What are the underlying constraining and enabling conditions for scholar-activism?

III What processes mediate between underlying conditions and scholar-activist practices?

The thesis responds to these questions through a combination of four studies. Two papers are literature-based studies that lay the groundwork for two empirical studies conducted in Sweden and South Africa. These contrasting cases aim to capture epistemic diversity and contextual complexities. The analysis draws on the political sociology of science, and the findings of the papers are synthesized through a critical realist framework. The results show that while scholar-activism manifests through certain practices and features, it is conditioned by underlying academic and social structures. Moreover, the findings indicate how scholars navigate structural conditions and actively shape their actions through reflexive processes.

1.3. The flow of the thesis

This introductory section is followed by Section 2, which acknowledges the diversity and nuances within the concept and practice of scholar-activism. Section 3 presents the methodology, where I outline the overall research design and methods across the four papers. Some remarks are shared about how positionality and ethics were navigated. Section 4 lays out the analytical perspectives that guided this thesis. It elaborates on critical realism and perspectives from the political sociology of science, such as academic capitalism, epistemic injustice, and boundary-work. Section 5 presents summaries of the four papers. Section 6 contains the main analytical body of this thesis, organized into three subsections that examine structural conditions, scholar-activist practices, and internal and social negotiations related to scholar-activism. The synthesis is concluded in section 7, where key contributions, limitations, and directions for future research are outlined.

2. Contextual and conceptual nuances

Scholar-activism is neither a new nor a uniform phenomenon. This section traces its contextual and conceptual nuances, beginning with a history of activist tendencies in academia, then examining the diverse conditions shaping scholar-activism across the Global North and South, and finally unpacking the definitional debates surrounding the term.

2.1. There is a history of activist tendencies at universities

We must acknowledge that activist efforts in academia have a long history, predating current debates. Scholar-activism can be understood as recurring moments where academics challenge dominant epistemic norms and institutional structures, reimagine the purposes of scientific knowledge, and mobilize their expertise for political and social transformation. The forms and purposes of these interventions can change according to their particular political and social contexts (Bourdieu, 1988; Hess, 2016).

Historically, we can find activism in conflicts over epistemic authority and struggles over access to scientific institutions. Medieval European universities largely served the church and crown; training clergy, lawyers, and administrators; and reinforcing religious orthodoxy (Clark, 2013). Yet even within these controlled spaces, dissenting practices emerged. For example, the Uniformity Act of 1662 in England, which barred non-Anglicans from Oxford and Cambridge, led to the creation of dissenting academies. These academies can be viewed as an early form of academic resistance, where intellectual work was bound to struggles for religious and political self-determination (Merton, 1938). In parallel, "Invisible Colleges" emerged in the 17th century as informal networks of intellectuals and scientists, allowing ideas to flow freely without the constraints of dogma (Kronick,

2001). These examples are another manifestation of the pursuit of knowledge as embedded in broader struggles over autonomy.

Another aspect of academic struggles is reflected in transformations of institutional dynamics within academia. The secularization of French universities under Napoleon and the introduction of the Humboldtian model in 19th century Germany were revolutionary shifts that altered the purpose of universities for independent research and critical inquiry. Similar patterns occurred beyond Europe: the 1918 Córdoba reform movement in Argentina, along with student activism in the preceding decade across many other Latin American countries, challenged elitist and clerical control of universities, inspiring a wave of democratic reforms across the continent (Van Aken, 1971). In colonial contexts, higher education was both a site of colonial domination and resistance, as seen in the intellectual efforts within Subaltern Studies in India (Chakrabarty, 2000; Spivak, 1988), in W.E.B. Du Bois's critique of historically Black colleges in the United States (Du Bois, 1935), and in struggles against the Afrikaner influence within South African universities under Apartheid (Maylam, 2014).

The political entanglements of science became especially stark in the 20th century, when world wars tied scientific research directly to military applications. As Frickel and Moore (2006) argue, science has always been political, but the post-war military-industrial complex intensified ethical debates about the responsibilities of scientists: What responsibility did physicists bear when their revolutionary research contributed to the destruction of life? Could science still be considered a public good if it served the mechanisms of war? The mobilization of science during the Cold War provoked counter-movements: the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs sought to mitigate nuclear risks (Kraft & Sachse, 2019), while organizations such as the Union of Concerned Scientists and Science for the People in the late 1960s challenged military and corporate control over research (Moore, 1996).

In the 20th century, many branches of academic work have co-evolved with social movements. Marxist theory, critical pedagogy, feminist traditions, and Black studies pioneered theories and research methodologies that centered marginalized communities and advanced emancipatory and social justice causes (Maguire, 1987). In other fields, such as ecology and environmental studies (Odum, 1969; Cramer et al., 1987) and quantum physics in the 1960s and 1970s (Kaiser, 2011), the influence of the post-war counterculture is evident. In public health, movements such as ACT UP in the 1980s combined grassroots mobilization with rigorous scientific engagement, reshaping research on HIV/AIDS (Epstein, 1996).

Today, science and scientists confront new global conditions. Multiple, overlapping crises, such as ecological collapse, mass displacement, democratic erosion, and the proliferation of disinformation, pose new challenges for scholars

regarding their social and political roles (Lawrence et al., 2024; Latour, 2004). In climate science, for example, some researchers have turned to civil disobedience through networks such as Scientist Rebellion, arguing that conventional modes of policy engagement have failed. They frame their activism as a moral obligation rooted in scholarly authority: "We must do what we can to halt the greatest destruction in human history" (Scientist Rebellion, n.d.).

It has been argued that we are living in a so-called post-truth era, in which scientific knowledge is increasingly contested, politicized, and characterized by high uncertainty. This context poses new and complex challenges for scientists as public actors, compelling them to navigate not only the communication of facts but also broader social dynamics, including trust, misinformation, and competing narratives (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Wynne, 2010). In this environment, the role of scholars extends beyond traditional research, requiring active engagement with diverse publics to defend the integrity of knowledge while addressing urgent societal concerns (Latour, 2004).

This section highlights how scholars have long navigated the tension between working within institutions and resisting their constraints. These practices evolve as dominant configurations of power, knowledge, and social struggle shift, yet they remain a recurrent feature of academic life. Recognizing this history complicates any narrative that treats scholar-activism as a recent invention or an exceptional deviation from academic norms. Instead, it underscores that the academy has always been contested terrain, where the pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from struggles over its purpose, direction, and responsibilities.

2.2. Experiences vary across the Global North and South

During a seminar, one participant shared her experiences from both Turkish and Swedish academia, highlighting that what may be perceived as activism in one context does not carry the same weight in another. Writing an op-ed in Turkey, for example, can be seen as overly political and risky. The invisible lines that define a system's tolerance for dissent are drawn differently across contexts, shaped by governance structures, cultural norms, and historical trajectories (Tarrow, 1998).

Scholar-activism thus unfolds in different ways depending on its setting, particularly influenced by contrasts between the Global North and Global South. Here, I follow Dados and Connell's (2012) framing of these terms as "more than a metaphor for underdevelopment," highlighting histories of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and economic and social inequalities that lead to disparities in living

standards and access to resources. One key factor shaping these differences is the varying levels of human rights protections for political activism and freedom of speech. David Pellow, a North American scholar-activist engaged in the Environmental Justice movement in Ecuador, recalls the heightened risks faced by his Ecuadorian colleagues, who were publicly denounced by politicians for their activism. Pellow himself notes: "I rarely have had to worry about risks to my physical safety in response to my writings and activism" (Armiero & De Rosa, 2022, p. 160).

Another distinction between the Global North and Global South lies in access to resources and how they are allocated. Borland and colleagues (2018) illustrate how the Energy Research Institute in South Africa navigates contextual constraints, balancing urgent local needs with the scarcity of resources for research publications. The institute often prioritized allocating limited resources to what mattered on the local level rather than producing international publications. In such settings, the realities of scientific production often do not align with Northern metrics of scholarly impact. These disparities in resource distribution influence how knowledge is produced, circulated, and valued across regions.

Beyond inequalities across regions, it is also crucial to acknowledge the presence of a Global South within the North, manifesting through hierarchies of privilege shaped by gender, race, caste, and other social divisions within any given society. These distinctions create vastly different conditions for scholar-activists, as evident in the literature (Richter et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2017), shaping their capacities, access to resources, and the specific challenges they face.

Exemplifying these differences does not suggest that either the Global North or the Global South is inherently more conducive to scholar-activism. Rather, these examples highlight how contextual conditions shape the possibilities and limitations of scholar-activism. Thus, a contextual understanding of scholar-activism requires attention to the historical and contemporary forces that shape its varied expressions. These considerations form the foundation of my decision to extend the empirical research beyond the Swedish context to South Africa, where vastly different struggles, histories, and institutional landscapes provide a broader perspective on the complexities of scholar-activism.

2.3. Navigating definitional nuances

The term *scholar-activism* carries multiple meanings, often marked by contradictions and tensions (Barnett, 2021; Hale, 2008). Barnett (2021) argues, "Academic activism is a universal category that lends itself to a panoply of

legitimate stances" (p. 514). The literature highlights various characteristics of scholar-activism, such as an emphasis on public engagement (Rangel, 2020; Richter et al., 2020), a willingness to address controversial issues (Carlsen & Rocca, 2022), and the strategic alignment of research with political action (Chatterton et al., 2010; Routledge & Derickson, 2015). Yet these examples represent dispersed practices rather than capturing scholar-activism as a distinct concept. While some argue that scholar-activism could be used as a "discursive umbrella" for seemingly diverse practices ranging from student activism to critical education and action-oriented research (Barnett, 2021), the central question is whether it is possible to identify a conceptual core that distinguishes scholar-activism from other forms of academic engagement?

To address this question, we need to explore what makes scholar-activism a concept in its own right. A classical approach to conceptualization would define scholar-activism by identifying the necessary and sufficient features that distinguish it from related phenomena (Hampton, 2006). However, as it is currently used in academic and public discourse, the term seems fluid and context-dependent. Instead of fitting within rigid definitional boundaries, scholar-activism appears to follow a *prototypical* model (Rosch & Mervis, 1975), where certain features and forms of engagement are widely recognized as representatives, while others occupy more ambiguous positions. In this model, vocal public engagement, advocacy, and alignment with social movements often characterize social activism, but not always. Such a prototypical conceptual structure allows for both a recognizable conceptual core and room for ambiguity and variation, without imposing rigid exclusions.

Many intellectual traditions have offered concepts of politically engaged scholarship that resonate with scholar-activism. Table 1 provides several overlapping yet distinct formulations: Said's *public intellectual* (1996), Gramsci's *organic intellectual* (1971), Fanon's *native intellectual* (1963), Collins' *intellectual activism* (2013), and Burawoy's *public sociology* (2005). While these frameworks share certain features, each carries its own contextual specificity that shapes its meaning and application.

Table 1- Parallel concepts
Key existing concepts for describing the societal commitments of intellectuals

Terminology	Source	Key features
Public intellectual	Edward Said (1996)	Engages in public debates Represents personal beliefs while arguing objectively
Specific intellectual	Michele Foucault (1980)	Works locally; avoids generalizations, focuses on concrete interventions in particular matters
Organic intellectual	Antonio Gramsci (1971)	Represents the group or class to which they belong; not necessarily a writer or scholar; advances the ideas and aspirations of their group
Native intellectual	Franz Fanon (1968)	Works against oppression; mobilizes people and raises consciousness; plays a leading role in decolonization struggles, often framed as 'violent'
Intellectual activist	Patricia Collins (2013)	Speaks truth to power; enacts ideas for social justice (poetry, research, etc.)
Public sociology/sociologist	Michael Burawoy (2005)	Creates dialogue between sociology and the broader public; frames politics as democratic dialogue
Activist scholarship	Hale (2008)	Conducts research in solidarity with marginalized communities; emphasizes a suppressed mode of knowledge production

For instance, Burawoy (2005) situates *public sociology* within a broader typology that also includes professional, critical, and policy sociology. Unlike professional sociology, which mostly adheres to disciplinary norms, public sociology fosters a dialogic relationship between scholars and the public, encouraging reciprocal engagement. Hale (2008) distinguishes *activist scholarship* from public sociology by arguing that it goes beyond merely communicating academic knowledge to the public. Instead, activist scholarship is a distinct mode of knowledge production that prioritizes critical societal problems and often involves direct participation in social movements, community-based initiatives, and collaborative research. As Hale describes it, activist scholarship represents "a largely suppressed alternative mode of knowledge production all its own" (p. 24).

Building on these distinctions, I propose a provisional concept of scholar-activism that encompasses both elements of *public sociology* and *activist scholarship,* while not being confined to either. Unlike Hale's (2008) activist scholarship, scholar-activism extends beyond research to include teaching, outreach, and the strategic use of academic resources such as credibility, funding, and networks. Scholar-

activism, in this sense, can be understood as the practice of mobilizing scholarly means in the broadest sense to advance certain social and political causes.

Thus, scholar-activism remains firmly grounded in an academic context. While terms such as *intellectual* or *scientist* can imply broader roles beyond the academy, and *academic* may encompass students, staff, and administrators, *scholar-activism* specifically refers to scholars affiliated with academic institutions who engage in activist work. This distinction sets it apart from Gramsci's notion of *organic intellectual*, which emphasizes the role of intellectuals in social movements outside the university.

Two questions remain: One is whether the *direction* of activism—its normative and political commitments— is an essential feature of the concept? Does it matter *which* causes a scholar supports? For instance, does their position on the political spectrum—left or right—determine whether they qualify as a scholar-activist? Many of the terms in Table 1 emphasize social justice and resistance to marginalization, but should these commitments be considered intrinsic to the concept of scholar-activism?

Another question concerns the forms through which activism is expressed. How vocal or radical must a scholar be to be considered an activist? Where do quieter, behind-the-scenes forms of academic resistance fit? Laing and colleagues (2022), for example, highlight alternatives to the more visible, confrontational modes of activism by examining "quiet" and "gentle" forms of scholar-activism embedded in the day-to-day practices of academic life. In what follows, I elaborate briefly on these two issues and outline the approach I will pursue in this thesis.

2.3.1. Navigating definitional challenge: Left or right?

Although scholar-activism is often equated with progressive or left-leaning politics, both the historical origins of the term "activism" and the ideological diversity of contemporary movements suggest that it need not be conceptually attached to one side of the political spectrum. Historically, activism has not been inherently left-wing. The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) traces early usages of the term to meanings centered on action, pragmatism, and lived experience rather than political orientation. Rudolf Eucken's late-19th-century notion of "ethical activism," for example, called for "living, doing, and experiencing" to precede all intellectual operations (Wise, 1915). Other early definitions describe it as "vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), without reference to left or right, suggesting that the concept, in its origin, is ideologically open-ended.

Over time, however, the term activism has often become associated with progressive and emancipatory movements. Two dynamics have reinforced this alignment. First, social movement studies have historically focused on progressive movements, leading to a limited understanding of far-right mobilizations and thereby reinforcing the tendency to associate activist terminology primarily with "leftist" agendas (Gelashvili, 2021). Second, self-identification with activism appears more common among left-leaning academics, perhaps due to the stronger consensus in progressive circles about the political aspects of scholarship (Bashiri, 2024). The result is an asymmetry: leftist scholar-activists are often explicitly labeled as such, while vigorous far-right campaigning may be framed as apolitical if it avoids activist terminology.

From an analytical standpoint, this focus on left-right distinctions can be limiting. As Jordan (2002) cautions, contemporary activism should not be assumed to follow the traditional right-left axis. Movements may combine seemingly contradictory elements, such as ecological protection alongside anti-immigrant positions, demonstrating that activist commitments can cut across conventional ideological boundaries. In this thesis, I do not privilege any particular political orientation. However, unsurprisingly, when taking the actor's perspective, certain political and normative tendencies, such as social and environmental justice, emerge as core features of scholar-activism.

2.3.2. Navigating definitional challenge: Loud or quiet?

The second remaining question related to defining scholar-activism is the extent to which it is perceived to be loud or visible (mainly associated with being disruptive, confrontational, controversial, or radical). A growing fraction of the literature challenges this prevailing assumption that activism must be loud and highly visible, calling instead for a recognition of "quiet," "gentle," and "everyday" forms of engagement (e.g., Maxey, 1999; Laing et al., 2022). This perspective broadens the definitional lens beyond familiar modes such as protest, civil disobedience, or militancy, which tend to dominate both public and scholarly imaginaries of activism. While many academics may relate to the activist ambitions for social change, the stereotypical understanding of activism as "loud" can be challenging to reconcile with academic norms.

Even when we adopt an inclusive and broad understanding of scholar-activist repertoires (e.g., ranging from writing and teaching critically to civil disobedience), the crucial distinction often lies in the willingness to remain with the discomfort brought about by activism. Greta Thunberg captured this sentiment in a panel discussion: "If you are an activist but too scared of saying things that will make people uncomfortable, then why are you an activist in the first place?"

(Politik des Verdrängens, 2025). In her remark, “discomfort” seems inevitable to activism, because part of the activist’s work involves deviating from dominant narratives. This is reflected in Collin’s conception of intellectual activism as “speaking truth to power.” (Collins, 2013)

From this perspective, it is possible to understand activism as boundary-crossing and transgressive (McAdam et al., 2001; Temper et al., 2019), without limiting it to specific forms of action. This allows for variation in what counts as activism across political and cultural contexts: what is routine in one setting may be transgressive and radical in another. In this thesis, the analysis resists privileging one form of action; instead, I recognize the diversity of approaches that emerge at the intersection of scholarship – often slow and reflexive – and activism, which is frequently urgent and vigorous.

3. Analytical perspectives

This section presents the analytical perspective that guides this thesis. Drawing on critical realism, I highlight the role of reflexive deliberation in mediating between pre-existing structures and emergent practices. In addition, insights from the sociology of science illuminate the institutional, disciplinary, and power dynamics, as well as the boundary negotiations, which shape scholar-activism. What follows is an elaboration on these perspectives.

3.1. Insights from critical realism

On the ontological level, this thesis positions scholar-activism at the intersection of structure and agency. Two major approaches that articulate this relationship between structure and agency are Anthony Gidden's structuration theory (1984) and Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism (CR) (2008). Both highlight the social, historical, and institutional contingencies of action. In structuration theory, structure and agency are inseparable (a.k.a. the "duality" of structure). Margaret Archer (1995), however, famously critiqued this view, arguing that Giddens' "duality of structure" collapses the temporal distinction between pre-existing structures and emergent action. CR, on the other hand, emphasizes analytical dualism (rather than duality) by distinguishing how structures pre-exist the sphere of action and are then transformed through social interaction.

CR complicates realist epistemology by incorporating the interpretive aspects of agency in making sense of the reality "out there" (Neuman, 2014), while still maintaining that reality exists independently of subjects' interpretations. From a constructivist standpoint, CR emphasizes the active role of agents in producing meanings and shaping discourses (Fox, 1998). From a realist standpoint, it acknowledges that such meaning-making occurs within material and institutional conditions that have enduring effects. In this way, CR allows us to hold these positions together, connecting the subjective dimensions of agency to the objective realities of social life (Sayer, 2004).

While CR accounts for agential power, the role of reflexive deliberation in mediating between structure and agency has received comparatively little attention. Here, Archer's contributions to CR are particularly valuable. Her work, especially *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Archer, 2003), expands CR by foregrounding the reflexive dimensions through which agents mediate between structural conditions and social action. Previous works analyzing the critical role of scholars in activism (Valente, 2019) and in transdisciplinary research (Nastar, 2023) have shown how Archer's concept of reflexivity provides a useful lens for understanding structure–agency dynamics. In this thesis, I will also draw on Archer's framework to guide my analysis.

In this framework (Figure 2), structures refer to the material and cultural conditions that pre-exist agency. As Archer argues, these conditions act as both "constraints" and "enablements" for agents' actions. Agency captures the ways in which individuals and collectives (i.e., agents) act upon their concerns. These practices may either sustain or transform existing structures. Reflexivity, or "internal conversations," mediates between the two: it is through internal and social (individual and collective, subjective and inter-subjective) negotiations that agents make sense of their situations and decide how to act. I refer to these three dimensions as: structural conditions, agential practices, and internal and social negotiations (Figure 2).

Figure 2. An adapted version of Archer's CR framework
The figure illustrates the three dimensions of the structure-agency-reflexivity framework (illustrated by the author)

To clarify, while structures are objective, this does not mean that agents are merely "puppets" of structures (Archer, 2000). Agents also hold generative power: through reflexivity, they interpret and evaluate their concerns and situations, and then act upon them (Archer, 2003). Since the knowledge of reality does not equate to reality, agents can make mistakes in their evaluation and face unintended consequences. At the same time, the agents have the power to act voluntarily in deviant ways and pay the price for their actions. Although structures exist independently of agents, they are only activated through the practices of agents.

For example, in Iran, the hijab laws and norms exist as objective structures but become visible only when enacted – or contested – through individual action, for example, adopting a deviant dress code.

In my analysis across the four papers, I focus on three dimensions: the structural conditions underlying scholar-activism, the agential practices that constitute scholar-activism, and the subjective and intersubjective negotiations that mediate between them. From this ontological position, I delve deeper into the specific dynamics of structure and agency at the intersection of academic and activist work.

3.2. Insights from sociology of science

This thesis draws on the sociology of science. The classical tradition in this field is associated with Robert K. Merton, who articulated a structural-functionalist view of science as an institution with the social function of producing certified knowledge (Merton, 1973). Central to this framework are the norms of communalism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism (CUDOS), which govern science and are upheld by internal academic rewards and sanctions. Merton's contribution generated a rich research agenda, ranging from studies of stratification and reward systems (Zuckerman, 1977, 1992) to analyses of professional careers and organizations (Ben-David, 1991; Ziman, 1984).

Critiques of Merton focused on whether CUDOS norms actually governed scientific practice. Mitroff's (1974) study of NASA scientists, for example, suggested that counter-norms such as secrecy and particularism were also valued. Similarly, Mulkay (1969), drawing on the Velikovsky controversy, showed that norms were open to interpretation and that scientists' judgments often departed from Mertonian ideals. From the 1970s onward, constructivist approaches – particularly within science and technology studies (STS) – further challenged Merton's framework by framing scientific facts as socially constructed, contingent, and locally embedded (Sismondo, 2010).

While the constructivist turn opened new avenues for analyzing science, it has also been criticized for undermining questions of structure, institutions, and power (Collins & Yearley, 1992; Sismondo, 2010). To address these gaps, some approaches have reemphasized the structural influences shaping the organization of science. Political-economic analyses, for example, highlight the entanglement of science with capitalism (Noble, 1977; Ziman, 1984; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), the impacts of commercialization on the organization of science (Mirowski & Van Horn, 2005; Cooper, 2008; Fisher, 2008), and the "propertization" of scientific products (Nowotny, 2005).

My approach aligns with calls to reintroduce social structure into the study of science (Frickel & Moore, 2006; Sklair, 1970). This perspective allows for bridging the sociology of science, political sociology, organizational studies, and the sociology of social movements (Moore et al., 2011). This approach is particularly valuable for analyzing scholar-activism, a site where meaning-making practices intersect with institutional arrangements, governance regimes, and power relations.

3.3. Scholar-activism: Which structure? What negotiations?

3.3.1. Common tensions for hybrid roles

As discussed in the previous section, in academia, scholarship is known to be governed by certain norms such as intellectual autonomy, impartiality, and the pursuit of durable disciplinary contributions. Activism, by contrast, prioritizes values of urgency, community engagement, and social accountability, often unfolding in spaces that demand immediate responses to pressing issues and constant adaptation to shifting circumstances. These differing priorities can result in role conflicts (Skinner et al., 2015; Menzies & Newson, 2007), though such conflicts are not unique to scholar-activism. Similar tensions arise in other forms of external engagement, such as academic entrepreneurship (Guo et al., 2019; Yin et al., 2025) and university-industry collaborations (Tartari & Breschi, 2021; Slaughter et al., 2002). Such tensions can affect both traditional academic values and the practical aspects of developing skills and administrative spaces for such hybrid roles. At the same time, research shows that entrepreneurial activities and university-industry collaborations can be framed as synergistic with emerging academic functions, generating funding, resources, knowledge, skills, and networks (De Silva, 2015).

This alignment reflects broader market-oriented logics in higher education policy, which increasingly position universities as engines of technology development, business creation, and regional growth (Laukkanen, 2003). By contrast, activist engagements often exist uncomfortably within these market-oriented logics and the dominant narratives of “impact” and the “third mission,” which prioritizes innovation and economic growth. In the next section, I elaborate on key analytical perspectives on university structures and explore the ways in which these uneven spaces are navigated by scholar-activists.

3.3.2. Academic structures

Over the past few decades, the organization of science has changed due to its evolving relationships with the state, the market, and the public (Frickel & Moore, 2006; p. 12). While the history of universities is full of examples of close relationships between industries and universities, these relationships are increasingly framed as "missions" and are institutionally "expected," rather than formerly "serendipitous" (Nedeva, 2013). These contemporary commercial influences on academia can be understood through the framework of "academic capitalism," which characterizes academia as competitive enterprises driven by marketization, managerialism, and audit cultures (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Beyond academic capitalism, frameworks such as Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994) and the Triple Helix model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), and analyses of global rankings regimes (Hazelkorn, 2015), help illuminate how universities are reshaped by policy and market pressures. The academic capitalism framework is particularly useful here, as it highlights the structural conditions under which research aligned with funding logics and market imperatives is privileged, while grassroots-oriented or activist scholarship is often marginalized as risky or unproductive (Lynch, 2006). As Edward Hackett (2014) illustrates:

> …capital constructs and equips laboratories, supports research, … , bestows "gifts" that smuggle donors' demands and desires into programs of education and research, and enriches university endowments. More subtly, capital shapes research agendas by raising alarm about gathering storms of offshore competitors and by concentrating research on topics that enhance economic performance and national security, while steering funds away from those that deepen fundamental knowledge or enhance human capabilities and well-being... (p. 636)

Capital increasingly shapes research agendas, privileging fields such as engineering over the humanities and social sciences (Hackett, 2014). The framework of academic capitalism helps capture the institutional constraints that shape conditions for academic practices aligned with social justice.

While financialization and competition over resources influence academia from North to South (Nedeva, 2013; Badat, 2010), more locally, universities are also embedded in their unique historical trajectories, economic systems, and struggles over power and legitimacy. Their governance structures, funding models, and hierarchies can both reflect and reproduce wider social inequalities, while also providing unique spaces for counter-hegemonic thought and engagement. In the South African example, the neoliberal restructuring intersects with specific racial and postcolonial dynamics, turning universities into contentious sites of both transformation and instruments of elite reproduction (Michelman, 2011). These

considerations highlight the importance of context-specific insights for understanding how academia interacts with capitalism and structural inequalities. In what follows, I highlight some of the distinct historical legacies and contemporary governance arrangements in Sweden and South Africa, which configure the structural terrain in which scholar-activism is practiced.

South Africa

South African higher education has been historically shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies that institutionalized racial segregation, elitism, and epistemic exclusion. Under apartheid, the 1959 Extension of University Education Act created ethnically defined institutions, while white-controlled governance and state funding mechanisms ensured compliance with the ideological priorities of Afrikaner nationalism (Beale, 1998; Maylam, 2014). Universities, thus, functioned both as sites of ideological reproduction and as spaces where counter-hegemonic voices emerged. Student movements, intellectual circles, and underground networks fostered radical intellectual traditions, ranging from Steve Biko's Black Consciousness and Neville Alexander's analyses of racial capitalism to Marxist worker education programs within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Biko, 1978; Sizwe, 1979; Nash, 1999). These institutions became arenas in which dominant ideologies were met with intellectual insurgencies that had global reach (Bond et al., 2013; Webster et al., 2024).

While the democratic transition of the 1990s prioritized transformation and redress in higher education institutions (HEIs), the structural injustices of apartheid persist, making the country the most unequal in the world (Sulla et al., 2022). These pressures have been reinforced by neoliberal reforms: inequalities in faculty demographics, institutional resources, and student access remain stark (Francis & Webster, 2019). Declining state subsidies, massification without proportional staff increases, and the commodification of higher education have deepened structural pressures on universities, constraining their capacity to address epistemic and social inequities (Badat, 2010; Davids & Waghid, 2021; Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2014). The #FeesMustFall movement vividly demonstrated how these material and epistemic legacies continue to shadow academia. Today, pockets of radical scholarship exist across various universities that work closely with marginalized communities (Dawson & Sinwell, 2012; Walsh, 2015; Amini, 2018).

Sweden

The post-World War II period saw major expansions in the Swedish higher education system (Engwall, 2007). During this period, HEIs operated under significant state involvement within the framework of a national welfare system. Since the 1990s, Swedish universities have undergone a shift toward reduced

influence from the state, as well as increased market-oriented governance and performance-based funding, reflecting broader neoliberal restructuring across the welfare state (Beach, 2013; Börjesson et al., 2016). Although HEIs operate under a centralized legal framework, they are diverse institutions, ranging from prestigious, comprehensive universities and research-intensive specialized universities to university colleges focused on education and research for welfare-state professions (Benner et al., 2022).

Since the 1990s, Swedish funding agencies, including the Swedish Research Council, Mistra (the Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research), and Formas (the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning), have been tasked with engaging societal challenges, overseeing several large-scale environmental research programs (Arnold et al., 2022). While these agencies have created opportunities for generous funding on normative and political topics, their priorities remain aligned with the broader political agenda. One critique has been that action-oriented research and topics related to social justice have been marginalized, as sustainable development initiatives are often overshadowed by paradigms of "green growth" and "ecological modernization" (Mobjörk & Linnér, 2006).

Sweden has long supported generous programs related to development and aid research and has historically played a prominent role in this area, particularly through Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) and its long-standing funding of research partnerships with universities in the Global South (Brodén Gyberg, 2014). However, the landscape is changing. For example, a major funding cut to development research took place in June 2023. A survey assessing the impact of this funding cut notes: "Less focus is now directed towards research areas such as poverty and development; methods such as applied and socially relevant research and fieldwork. Geographical focus has shifted from Global South to Europe and the Global North, and Sweden" (Swedish Development Research Network, 2024; p. 24).

Swedish higher education offers opportunities for scholar-activism through strong protections for academic freedom and relatively accessible funding streams. At the same time, it can pose constraints, as shifting policy and funding priorities risk narrowing the space for critical and engaged scholarship.

3.3.3. Boundary negotiation

Previous sections have painted a picture of the structural conditions, constraints, and contradictions that scholar-activism may encounter. Acknowledging the differing norms, values, and rules of activism and academia (Skinner et al., 2015), a recurring theme in the literature frames these structures as institutional and

disciplinary boundaries that scholar-activists must navigate (Maxey, 1999; Young et al., 2010; Choudry, 2014; Hern, 2016; Laing et al., 2022). In this context, boundary-work provides a helpful analytical lens (Gieryn, 1983). Originally developed by Thomas Gieryn (1983), boundary-work describes acts of demarcation between science and non-science, such as art, religion, and other forms of knowledge. It is often seen as the act of defending the autonomy of science from political or ideological influences, but the concept also extends beyond delineating differences to negotiating connections across boundaries, including blurring or transforming them (Langley et al., 2019).

Applying the framework of boundary-work to the intersection of science and activism, albeit less common, is not unprecedented. For instance, Kelly Moore (1996) explored the role of activist scientists in American political protests (1955–1975), highlighting how they maintained their credibility as objective scholars while acting as political agents committed to serving the public good.

From a CR perspective, boundary-work can be understood at the intersection of structure and agency (Sismondo, 2010). Scientific boundaries pre-exist scholarly action and exert a direct influence on how scholars make sense of situations and act within them. Boundary-work, in turn, encompasses the internal and social negotiations through which scholar-activists navigate, interpret, and sometimes reshape these boundaries in their practice.

Although boundary-work illuminates how scientific authority and autonomy are negotiated, it largely overlooks the role of academic hierarchies in determining who can engage in such work. Albert and Kleinman (2011) argue that scientific fields are hierarchically structured spaces, based on the accumulation of "scientific capital" by each scientist. Scientific capital encompasses the values associated with different modes of knowledge production, dissemination, and professional trajectories. Those with greater scientific capital are better positioned to participate in negotiations on defining legitimate forms of scientific knowledge, making the scientific field "a space of struggle for power" (Albert & Kleinman, 2011, p. 266).

However, not everyone enjoys the same level of scientific capital. These inequalities are partly rooted in the colonial history of science and are perpetuated through neocolonial practices, including the systematic devaluation of non-Western knowledge systems (Ralfs, 2023; Harding, 2001). Pre-existing institutional and social arrangements confer unequal power to actors engaged in boundary-work: "Members of certain social groups identified by ethnicity, class, race, gender, professional status, and age, for example, routinely enjoy advantageous positions that allow them to commandeer rules and resources and define situations" (Frickel & Moore, 2006, p. 10). In contexts of entrenched inequality, such as South Africa, participation in boundary negotiations is uneven and strongly shaped by racial and gender identity (Davis & Waghid, 2021).

4. Methodological approach

4.1. Overall rationale and design

The methodology of this thesis works iteratively with its theoretical assumptions. As stated by Grix (2002) “it is our ontological and epistemological positions that shape the very questions we may ask in the first place, how we pose them and how we set about answering them” (p. 179). Theory provides the rationale for selecting techniques, structuring the research process, and guiding data analysis. This reflects what Chan and Clarke (2019) call the “mutual affordance of theory and methodology,” highlighting their symbiotic relationship. In line with this principle, a CR approach guided the methodological design of this thesis, influencing everything from the choice of research questions to the analysis of material. For example, Wynn and Williams (2012), researchers in information systems studies, demonstrate that CR principles can be applied methodologically to “identify and abstract the events being studied, usually from experiences, as a foundation for understanding what really happened in the underlying phenomena” (Wynn & Williams, 2012; p. 796). Similarly, in this thesis, observable experiences and events act as entry points for inferring underlying phenomena. This means individuals’ stories are not treated as factual accounts but as expressions of meaning embedded in specific social contexts (Baker, 2001).

Building on this foundation, the thesis is structured around four distinct studies designed to address the overall research questions (see Figure 3). Paper I synthesizes existing knowledge and maps the field, and Paper II focuses on grounding the concept of scholar-activism. These two studies treat existing literature as sources of data. Building on these literature-based studies and through empirical explorations, Paper III highlights the diversity of interpretations among scholars, and Paper IV demonstrates the context-dependency of scholar-activism. Taken together, these studies highlight various dimensions of scholar-activism: conceptual, interpretive, institutional, and geopolitical.

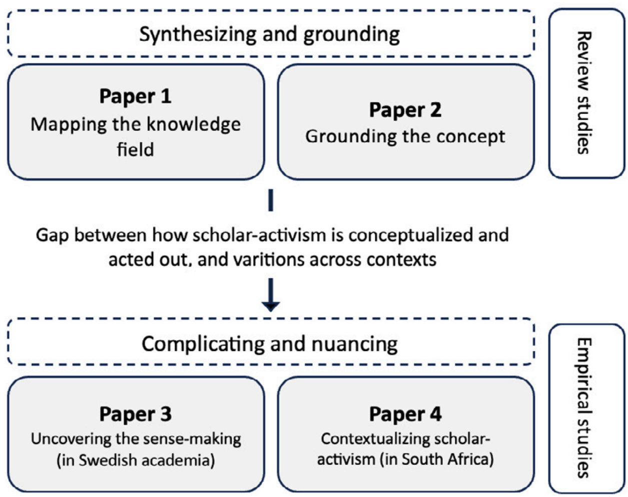

***Figure 3. The combination of the papers in this* thesis**
The figure shows how different literature-based and empirical studies address the knowledge gaps

In this thesis, I integrated the results of the four papers through a meta-analysis using a CR lens. The findings from all papers were coded, categorized, and thematized in accordance with the CR framework presented in section 3. In section 6, I present a detailed synthesis of these findings. In what follows, I provide a more detailed account of the data collection methods employed across the four studies.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

4.2.1. Sources of data

As mentioned earlier, while the term scholar-activism is increasingly invoked in media and public discourse, it remains conceptually elusive. Based on personal encounters and several pilot interviews, it became clear that identifying individuals who explicitly self-identify as “scholar-activists” and have a clear understanding of the concept is challenging. In contrast, the academic literature on scholar-activism offered a valuable site for research, as ideas are more clearly articulated and theoretically developed. Academic texts provide structured spaces in which to explore how the concept has been approached, debated, problematized, and

theorized. This allowed me to investigate the meanings and practices associated with scholar-activism through a systematic review of the literature.

In the first paper, my co-authors and I adopted a broad approach, investigating all literature that engaged with scholar-activism as a central phenomenon. This approach enabled us to map the field, synthesize existing knowledge, and identify thematic patterns in how scholar-activism has been discussed. During this process, two distinct types of contributions emerged: those authored by individuals who explicitly self-identify as scholar-activists and conceptualize the practice from within (examples include Cox, 2015; Croog et al., 2018; Deschner et al., 2020), and those offering more detached, analytical perspectives on the phenomenon (examples include Heinich, 2023; Hilligardt; 2023; Isopp, 2015).

We noticed numerous accounts produced by scholar-activists, including auto-ethnographic, self-reflective, or narrative works. While such approaches may limit generalizability by focusing on situated, individual experiences, they provide a unique opportunity to conceptualize scholar-activism grounded in lived practice. Behar (1996) argues: “the exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to” (p. 14). Thus, I chose to conduct a more focused review in Paper II, concentrating specifically on literature written by those who self-identify as scholar-activists.

While the literature provides valuable access to well-articulated accounts of scholar-activism, its very nature, as curated and formalized discourse, can overlook aspects of scholar-activism that are recognized as fluid, elusive, and at times contradictory (Routledge, 1996). Therefore, to capture these less formalized dimensions, Paper III focused on activist-oriented academic environments – contexts where scholars are likely to encounter the idea of scholar-activism or recognize themselves, to some extent, as scholar-activists. Thus, scholars were invited to participate regardless of their stance toward activism, allowing access to less formalized positions that may not be reflected in the literature.

We selected two environmentally focused, inter- and transdisciplinary environments in Sweden. In these settings, scholars are exposed to the notion of scholar-activism, yet few explicitly adopt the label of “scholar-activist.” This ambiguity provides a valuable opportunity to capture a range of interpretations of the concept, as well as the tensions and contradictions that shape its meaning within specific academic contexts. The decision to focus on two environments was not to conduct a direct comparison, but to study the phenomenon of scholar-activism in settings where it is present and can provide rich data on how academic environments shape scholars’ experiences of activism.

Moreover, the publication patterns identified in Paper I revealed a strong over-representation of perspectives from the Global North. To address this gap, Paper

IV was developed as an empirical study focused on South Africa, with the aim of developing contextually sensitive insights. This choice was motivated by the understanding that South African academia, deeply entangled in social and political struggles (Davids & Waghid, 2021), offers a valuable vantage point for examining how scholar-activism unfolds within specific historical, institutional, and political contexts.

Through online searches and personal networks, I identified academic communities at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) that explicitly engage in scholar-activism. Following a multi-site ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995), I examined the life histories of two scholar-activists alongside two institutional controversies. The life histories allowed for an exploration of how scholarship and activism are interwoven in response to broader sociopolitical conditions, while the two controversies indicated moments of intensified negotiation around scholar-activism. These moments offered insight into how scholar-activism is negotiated not only at the individual level but also collectively and institutionally.

4.2.2. Method of data collection and analysis

While detailed methodological procedures are outlined within each paper, here I provide a broad overview. For the literature review studies, a systematic approach based on Arksey and O'Malley (2005) was adopted. This method is characterized by a structured process of identifying and selecting relevant literature from academic journals. A systematic review was essential due to the dispersed nature of the literature on scholar-activism, which spans diverse intellectual traditions and disciplinary contexts, often leading to differing interpretations. For Paper I, following a predefined search protocol, literature was collected from Scopus and Web of Science. Applying the exclusion criteria narrowed the initial dataset to 85 publications, which were then analyzed using NVivo. In this study, the first and second authors were mainly responsible for data collection, analysis, and methodology development, while the third author was responsible for the bibliometric network analysis.

For the second literature study, which focused on literature authored by self-identified scholar-activists, the dataset was refined to include only those that included references to authors' own scholar-activist engagement. This yielded 25 papers, which were then analyzed inductively to develop the conceptual core features of scholar-activism. This study is a single-authored paper.

Paper III employed an interview-based approach within Swedish academic environments. The rationale for this method was to gain in-depth insights into participants' perspectives and ways of sense-making (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Invitations were sent to scholars affiliated with two selected academic units, and

16 participants agreed to be interviewed. While self-identification as a scholar-activist was not a formal selection criterion, some individuals were purposefully invited based on our prior knowledge of their explicit engagement with activism. Interviews were transcribed and transferred to NVivo for inductive analysis. In this study, all authors contributed to the conceptualization, analysis, and writing, while the first author took primary responsibility for data collection and transcription.

While Sweden represented a more familiar context, South Africa was less known to me. Therefore, to gain a deeper contextual understanding, I adopted an ethnographic approach (Van Maanen, 2017), including a three-month research stay at UJ. In addition to observations during academic seminars and classes, I participated in protests and other activist events. In total, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with scholars, community organizers, and university administrators. Secondary sources were used for this research to provide biographical accounts and to analyze the controversies. All data were transferred to NVivo for inductive analysis. As the sole author, I was responsible for every stage of the research process.

4.3. Some words on positionality and ethics

Positionality is about where one stands in the world. It is shaped by one's worldview and social and political context (Yip, 2023). Researchers do not enter the world as blank slates. Some of our assumptions about the world are formed through our personal trajectories. Consequently, our lived experiences and intimate knowledge of the world can shape how we choose to view it philosophically, and the research questions we deem worth pursuing (Positionality, 2014). Temper and colleagues (2019) developed ten archetypes of the transgressive researcher, which I use to reflect on my own positionality. I identify with four of these archetypes (Figure 4): the co-conspirer, the critical comrade, the queer enquirer, and the slow and care-full scholar, which I elaborate on below.

Based on my lived experience, I am drawn to marginal forms of knowledge and ways of being. I have frequently felt like an outsider, as a woman in the patriarchal society of Iran, and later as an immigrant and person of color in a predominantly white Swedish society. I have often found myself struggling internally to find my own place among what was recognized as the mainstream and hegemonic forms of being and knowing. I believe these experiences were mirrored in my engagement with research participants, where I felt like a "co-conspirer," who seeks to "amplify the knowledge held in marginal spaces that sits outside of the hegemonic meaning-making machine" (Temper et al., 2010; p. 7).

My very position as a Ph.D. student has often felt precarious – on the verge, curious, and still in formation – a researcher in-the-making. My interdisciplinary background induced in me both a sense of being unrooted and a kind of intellectual fluidity; over time, I learned to navigate different academic spaces. Although occupying these in-between spaces was at times uncomfortable, I embraced it as a strength. It helped me to burst the limits of my epistemological bubble and float more freely, outside the binaries of gender, nationality, and discipline, cultivating a sense of "queer flexibility" in research (Herising, 2005; see Figure 4).

My education in sustainability science was particularly formative. In this field, close entanglement with society, transdisciplinary research, and an openness to normativity are foundational. It was here that I encountered scholars who conducted excellent scientific research while taking on activist roles. This experience was a gateway to the topic of my Ph.D. research.

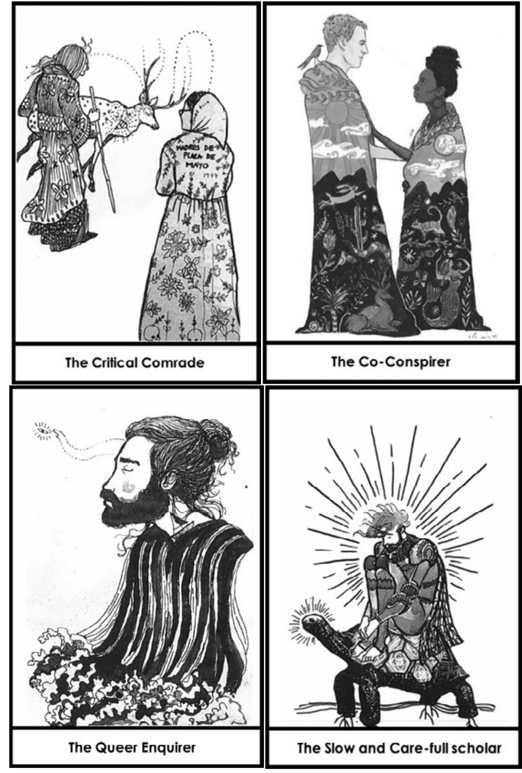

Figure 4. Archetypes of a transgressive researcher
The four archetypes that I relate to in my own reflections on positionality (the archetypes and the artistic images were developed by Temper et al., 2019)

My engagement with the topic of scholar-activism throughout this Ph.D. project has made me more aware of the potential pitfalls of academic work. I came across the concept of "extractivist research" during my fieldwork, as something to be consciously avoided. Extractivism occurs when "researchers can mirror the practice of commodity extractivism by extracting resources like knowledge, wisdom and stories in the form of data from communities" (Gorman, 2024; p. 161). During my fieldwork in South Africa, I had to negotiate my positionality as a visitor, an academic, and a non-South African (an outsider), while also drawing on my own experiences of marginalization and sense of solidarity with struggles for justice (an insider). I lived with local hosts, participated in protests, and observed day-to-day activist life. Aware of the risks of over-observation, I made deliberate efforts to cultivate trust and transparency. I reminded myself not to treat every moment as data to be "used," but instead to prioritize human connection, solidarity, and constructive contribution.

I communicated openly about the aims of my research, clarified the voluntary nature of participation, and emphasized participants' right to withdraw at any point. I also explained the anonymity and confidentiality mandated by ethics approval in Sweden, a process that had taken me five months and three rounds of revisions. However, once in the field, these measures proved to be incomplete. Many participants, high-profile public intellectuals and well-known activists, pushed back against anonymity. Several explicitly insisted that they did not want their stories to be detached from their names and their political legacies dismissed. This experience forced me to confront the limitations of standardized ethical procedures in social science research. It also raised critical questions: Is it ethical to anonymize participants who *want* to be named, particularly when doing so risks undermining their efforts?

To address this issue, I took several steps. First, I applied for an amendment of my ethics application to give participants a choice to be named if they so wished. Fortunately, the application was granted, and I could conduct my research in a more ethically sensitive manner. Second, I adopted a dialogical approach. I shared full transcripts with participants, something many appreciated, and returned early drafts of the research for their feedback. Beyond ensuring transparency, this process created a reflexive space for them too. During one interview, a participant told me that it was through a seminar I had previously given—where I shared preliminary reflections on scholar-activism—that they themselves began reflecting on their role. This moment was both humbling and affirming. It reminded me that research can matter when it creates dialogical spaces like a "critical comrade" that enables mutual learning through the research process (Temper et al., 2019; see Figure 4).

These experiences reshaped my understanding of research ethics, not as a set of tick-box procedures, but as a form of reflexivity: to act ethically meant staying attuned to the lived contexts and desires of participants, even when these contradicted institutional norms. This meant slowing down, confronting my assumptions, and making space for emotional and epistemic discomfort. This required what Stengers (2018) calls "slow science," a science that hesitates, doubts, and listens before it speaks.

The words of Siphiwe Mbatha, the South African community activist became a powerful ethical anchor: "At the end, it is about them. They get whatever dissertation… they are gone, never to be found." His reflection confronted me with the uncomfortable truth that I risked becoming yet another academic who benefits from others' struggles without materially or spiritually contributing back. These moments of self-doubt reminded me of my own complicity, but also of my agency. They compelled me to ask: How can I make this work useful to the communities I study?

I realized that if I failed to engage seriously with these questions, I would remain trapped in the academic cycle of consuming and producing paper after paper. Temper and colleagues (2018), inspired by a feminist ethics of care, describe the "slow and care-full scholar" (Figure 4) as a person who

> advocates for slowness not just as a form of resistance but also as a way to improve the quality and depth of scholarly material. Instead of rushed, superficial readings and interactions, she engages deeply and care-fully with texts and her research communities, taking time to think, consider, critique, and create. (p. 11)

This does not mean I never rushed – for writing these very lines, I needed to rush. However, I also learned the value of small, meaningful ways to challenge dominant norms that make us act irresponsibly.

5. Summary of papers

5.1. Paper I – Scholar-activism as an object of study in a diverse literature: preconditions, forms, and implications

This paper focuses on the available literature on scholar-activism. Following a structured review of 85 core papers, we synthesized findings and identified key knowledge gaps. While scholar-activism is rooted in long-standing scholarly debates about the relationship between science and politics, our research shows that empirical and theoretical studies focusing on *scholar-activism* as a distinct phenomenon are more limited. Definitions vary, but most highlight public engagement with controversial topics and commitments to social justice. However, comprehensive, cumulative insights are hindered by fragmented terminology and limited empirical grounding.

To map the field, we developed a bibliometric network by merging data from Scopus and Web of Science. The analysis revealed a widely dispersed body of work with no clear disciplinary core, though human geography, sociology, and social movement studies formed loose clusters. Several distributive insights also emerged. For example, we found that publications were relatively recent, with over 80% produced between 2014 and 2023 and were primarily theoretical, reflexive, or collective autoethnographic. Most studies focus on North America and Europe, with South Africa a notable Global South contributor. Academia itself is the primary site of activism, tackling issues such as neoliberalism, academic freedom, and social justice, while environmental activism remains less common in the literature. Scholar-activists in the literature are predominantly in the social sciences and humanities, with only limited representation from the natural sciences.

Our qualitative analysis highlighted three main themes in the study of scholar-activism: 1) the *preconditions* for scholar-activism, including personal, organizational, and institutional factors; 2) the *forms* that scholar-activism takes within research, teaching, and collaborations; and 3) the *implications* of scholar-

activism on individual scholars, as well as broader epistemic and societal effects (Figure 5).

Preconditions for SA are shaped by individual motivations, organizational structures, and broader institutional environments. On a personal level, experiences, emotions, identity, and a strong sense of moral responsibility often drive scholars into activism, sometimes shaped by prior political involvement or research interests. Organizational factors, such as tenure structures, norms around academic publishing, and collegial support systems, can either enable or constrain activism. At the institutional level, neoliberal reforms, historical movements, and disciplinary norms heavily influence the space available for scholar-activism.

Scholar-activism manifests through activist research, teaching, and collaborations. Activist research aims to produce knowledge *with* and *for* communities of struggle. It challenges traditional hierarchies and confronts epistemic injustices, while also grappling with potential risks of unintentionally reproducing inequalities. It involves critical methodologies, such as participatory action research, feminist ethics of care, and reflexivity. Activist teaching emphasizes critical and transformative pedagogies, particularly those rooted in frameworks such as Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. It fosters students' critical consciousness, viewing education as inherently political and students as agents of change. Lastly, activist collaborations stress the importance of building long-term, trust-based relationships with social movements and within academia itself. These collaborations challenge competitive academic norms through solidarity, resource sharing, and collective action, while also recognizing the complexities and contingencies of maintaining such partnerships over time.

The implications of scholar-activism span individual, epistemic, and societal dimensions. On the individual level, scholar-activists often face significant pressures, such as marginalization, career risks, harassment, emotional exhaustion, and conflicts between their academic and activist roles. Epistemically, scholar-activism disrupts dominant knowledge structures by promoting epistemic decolonization and diversifying research approaches. At the same time, it raises concerns about bias, the co-optation of marginalized voices, and potential threats to scientific autonomy. On the societal level, scholar-activism can strengthen social movements by providing resources, critical insights, and pathways to policy change; however, it can also reinforce power imbalances, risk exploiting activist communities, and at times inadvertently harm the very movements it seeks to support.

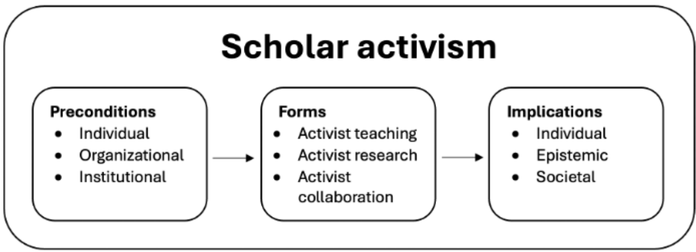

Figure 5. Scholar-activism in the literature
The findings of Paper I reveal the different themes within the literature on scholar-activism

This study reveals significant gaps, including a lack of empirics from the Global South, limited cross-disciplinary engagement, and the under-exploration of right-leaning activism and climate-related activism. While this review is limited by language and database scope, it underscores the need for more systematic, comparative, and conceptually grounded studies on scholar-activism.

5.2. Paper II – Scholar-activism: Conceptualizing scholar-activism through scholar-activist accounts

Paper II clarifies the core features of scholar-activism from the actor's perspective. To do so, it employs a conceptual review of literature authored by self-identified scholar-activists. This approach allowed for an empirically grounded understanding of the conception, rooted in the lived experiences of those who explicitly define their work as activism, rather than adding to theoretical abstractions that risk fragmenting the definition further.

The analysis traced the intellectual inspirations of scholar-activists to four main traditions: critical geography, feminist thought, popular education, and critical social theory. It also identified various terms used to describe the activist engagement of scholars, including "organic intellectual," "intellectual activist," "public intellectual," "tempered radical," and "liberation theologian." Each of these terms emphasizes unique aspects, such as community ties, institutional reform, or faith-based activism. These terms, rooted in diverse sociopolitical traditions, highlight that while scholar-activism itself is less established as a concept, scholar-activists draw on other established concepts to substantiate theorization of their work.

Paper II further explores the common prototypical features of scholar-activism as a self-standing concept. Three features emerge: criticality, normative orientation, and active engagement (see Figure 6 for an overview). Criticality, as part of scholar-activism, involves a critique of the present, challenging prevailing norms and assumptions that perpetuate inequalities and injustices. Reflexivity is integral to criticality, requiring scholars to critically examine their own positions, values, and assumptions in order to foster both objectivity and self-awareness. Normative orientation focuses on a commitment to social justice and political change, setting scholar-activism apart from scholarship in line with the political status quo. Active engagement, the third component, encompasses committed and practical engagements, also emphasizing the quality of involvement. The self-identified accounts show that scholar-activism extends beyond confrontational, visible actions to include emotional investment, long-term commitment, and diverse roles within social movements or collectives.

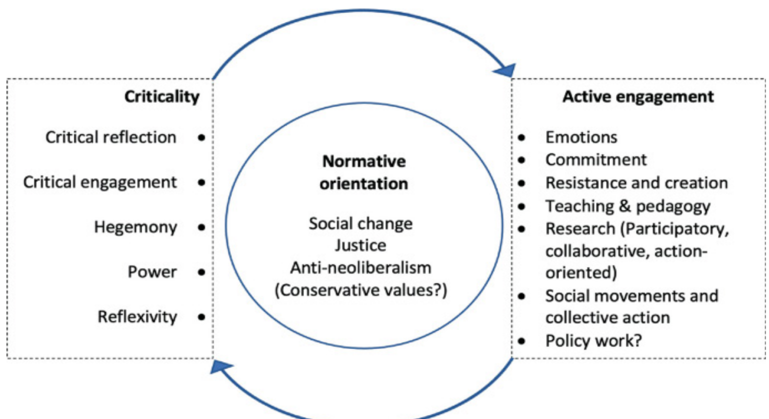

Figure 6. Core conceptual features of scholar-activism
The findings of Paper II outline the three core conceptual features of scholar-activism

Scholar-activism is thus framed as a critical, normative, and active engagement aimed at challenging problematic dominant structures and fostering change. This paper contributes to the overall thesis by providing a deeper conceptual understanding of scholar-activism. It concludes that, although scholar-activism remains fraught with practical challenges, a conceptual reconciliation between scholarship and activism is indeed possible and necessary.

5.3. Paper III – Am I an activist? Making sense of scholar-activism across boundaries and ambiguities

Paper III applies a combined framework of sensemaking and boundary-work to investigate how scholars interpret and navigate the ambiguities and tensions of scholar activism. This study builds on interviews with scholars from two activist-oriented academic environments in Sweden. The findings highlight five interrelated sensemaking dynamics: (1) significant encounters as cues for sense-making; (2) boundary-work across concepts, stereotypes, and values; (3) identity negotiations between personal and professional selves; (4) the influence of academic environments and disciplinary fields; and (5) contextual variation across time and space.

First, formative encounters, such as exposure to strikes during studies and inspiring role models who openly integrated activism with scholarship, act as pivotal cues for sensemaking. These moments serve as turning points, leaving lasting impressions that motivate scholars to imagine broader possibilities for integrating activism into academic roles. Second, scholars engage in boundary-work to navigate the fluid and contested concept of scholar-activism. This includes negotiating stereotypes of activism as extreme or confrontational, embracing more pluralistic understandings of activism as collaborative or relational, and reconciling scholarly norms and activist values.

Third, the sensemaking process is closely tied to identity work, involving the negotiation between personal and professional identities. Scholars' self-concepts shape their engagement with activism and, in turn, are reshaped through these engagements. As they navigate their sense of self in between their activist and academic commitments, some frame activism as a moral duty rooted in academic privilege, while others encounter constraints that compromise their efforts within institutional structures. Fourth, academic contexts influence how activism is negotiated. While some academic environments and disciplines can foster activist engagement and a sense of community, others may impose pushback, silencing, or tension.

Lastly, we demonstrate that the meaning of activism is influenced by broader political, social, and institutional contexts. Perceptions of risk, freedom, and legitimacy vary across social settings, institutional environments, and individual vulnerabilities, and can influence both the extent and form of engagement. Scholar-activism can seem more constrained or more accepted as scholars move across geopolitical contexts but also over the course of time. These variations

underscore that scholar-activism is a situated and evolving practice, deeply tied to shifting temporal and spatial conditions.

The study shows that scholar-activism is neither a monolithic nor fixed identity, but a dynamic, interpretative, and ongoing practice. It highlights that while scholars often feel a moral imperative to engage politically, they must simultaneously negotiate academic credibility and conflicting institutional logics. Moreover, this paper acknowledges the tensions and ambiguities not as flaws to be eliminated, but as central features of scholar-activism as a contextually bound phenomenon.

5.4. Paper IV – In the "context of struggle": Emergence and challenges of scholar-activism in South Africa

Paper IV moves beyond the Northern-centric focus of most existing literature and addresses this research imbalance by centering on South Africa – a country deeply shaped by revolutionary struggle, persistent inequality, and vibrant intellectual activism. This paper studies scholar-activism within South African academia and the conditions that enable or hinder it. It traces the emergence of scholar-activism through the life histories of two scholar-activists, Patrick Bond and Trevor Ngwane, as well as two controversies around scholar-activism within their scholarly community.

The findings highlight that scholar-activism emerges from the convergence of experiential, intellectual, and institutional trajectories. The cases of Ngwane and Bond illustrate how lived experiences of political struggle, such as Ngwane's student activism and Bond's relocation to South Africa during anti-apartheid resistance, ground later efforts to align scholarship with activism. Intellectual trajectories, in this case engagement with Marxist theory, provided conceptual frameworks that guided their scholar-activism and informed broader movement strategies. Institutional footholds and accumulated scientific capital offered resources, networks, and bureaucratic support, enabling scholars to integrate activism into their scholarship. While often fragile, these institutional spaces served as incubators and allowed experiential and theoretical insights to manifest in sustained scholar-activist practices.

Analysis of the controversies revealed that the practice of scholar-activism faces significant constraints shaped by institutional structures and epistemic politics. Neoliberal logics often sideline grassroots activism that does not conform to

performance systems. Such pressures can render activist scholarship financially precarious and politically vulnerable. Epistemic politics further reveal the political dimensions of academic boundary-work, raising questions about who has the authority to define legitimate academic knowledge and on what terms. Existing disputes illustrate how scholar-activists must navigate tensions between protecting academic authority and avoiding gatekeeping practices that silence activist voices.

These findings underscore that while scholar-activism in South Africa emerges as an organic and legitimate response to the country's legacies of resistance and ongoing injustices, it is constrained by neoliberal policies, bureaucratic pressures, and persistent racialized inequalities within universities. The study confirms the importance of conducting contextual and historically informed research on scholar-activism to fully understand its dynamics.

6. Synthesis of the findings

The four papers trace the conceptual development and empirical manifestations of scholar-activism across different academic and national contexts. In this section, I synthesize their findings through the lens of a CR framework, inspired by Archer's model of agency, structure, and reflexivity (Figure 2).

Scholar-activism can be identified through its agential practices, where scholars' concerns and evaluations of their circumstances are translated into concrete actions. This is where I synthesize the findings related to practices of scholar-activism, namely activist teaching, activist research, and activist collaborations. Another domain relates to the structural conditions: the institutional, geopolitical, epistemic, and cultural structures that both enable and constrain scholar-activist practices. The third domain relates to internal and social negotiations that scholars engage in to make sense of scholar-activism in relation to these structural constraints and enablements (see Table 2 for an overview). In what follows, I elaborate on each of these domains in detail.

Table 2. Synthesis of findings
The findings across the four papers are listed below, guided by Archer's CR framework

Scholar-activist practices	Internal and social negotiations	Structural conditions
Activist research • Producing knowledge with and for communities of struggle • Using critical methodologies: e.g., Participatory Action Research • Addressing and challenging epistemic injustices **Activist teaching** • Implementing critical, radical, transformative pedagogies • Teaching is politically grounded • Treating students as agents of change • Creating learning spaces that support activism **Activist collaboration** • Sharing skills and resources • Inviting activists into academic spaces • Taking on roles in activist organizations, such as teacher, narrater, expert	**Mobilizing emancipatory motivation** • Motivations to dismantle systems of oppression • Personal experiences shaping such values and moral judgements • Exposure to critical intellectual traditions **Engaging criticality** • Challenging dominant narratives and assumptions • Questioning one's positionality through self-reflexivity **Navigating legitimacy** • Preserving and negotiating academic integrity • Demarcating or blurring the boundaries of science and activism **Negotiating trust and solidarity** • Finding common interests through solidarity • Cultivating trust in long-term relationships with communities	**Historical and geopolitical contexts** • Histories of oppression and resistance impact individuals and academic practices • Perceptions of scholar-activism are context-dependent **Organizational and disciplinary culture** • Organizational cultures can contrain or enable activist engagement • Disciplinary norms define the lines of political engagement **Academic governance and accountability structures** • Neoliberalism and academic capitalism constrain scholar-activism • Audit culture can work against scholar-activism **Epistemic regimes** • Some intellectual traditions enable scholar-activism • Epistemic injustices marginalize certain forms of knowing

6.1. Scholar-activist practices

Scholar-activist practices refer to the actions that constitute scholar-activism. The findings from Papers I and II, supported by empirical evidence from Paper IV, highlight key aspects of these practices. Within this framework, three principal domains emerge where scholar-activism is acted upon, namely research, teaching, and collaboration.

6.1.1. Activist research

A common thread in scholar-activist practices is how they manifest in academic research. This means mobilizing the capacity for knowledge production for a particular cause. Activist research challenges epistemic injustice (Barnett, 2021), aims to decolonize knowledge, and rejects the "imperialist histories of the academy" (Routledge & Derickson, 2015; p. 391). It concerns forms of research that prioritize the stories and voices of those marginalized in media and public platforms (Paper IV). In this way, they can improve academic rigor by including diverse voices and perspectives.

In activist research, methodology is harnessed as a tool for resistance and transformation. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a key method (Chatterton et al., 2010), guiding the co-production of knowledge with activists and communities (examples in Papers I, II, and IV). These collaborations become sites for addressing entrenched epistemic inequalities. The "Energy Racism" research discussed in Paper IV is a good example of PAR, showcasing research designed to address communities' struggles in its entirety (from the choice of topic to methodology and outcomes).

Bringing activist dynamics into the research process also activates certain structural dimensions, such as the colonial and Eurocentric history of academic knowledge production. As activist research is utilized to resist and transform these structures, the same structures can constrain it, keeping it at the margins (Reynolds et al., 2020) and framing it as a "suppressed form of knowledge production" (Hale, 2008; p. 25).

6.1.2. Activist teaching

A second theme of scholar-activist practices manifests in teaching. Education is a meaningful site of activism for many scholars. The intention is not only to change students' worldviews but also to activate students as "agents of change." Activist teaching is politically grounded, linking students' lived realities to critical educational content (e.g., class dynamics described in Paper IV). Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970) serves as a major source of inspiration in activist teaching. It highlights the dual role of education in both perpetuating entrenched power relations and enabling resistance and transformation. Freire argued that education, as used by the ruling class, perpetuates hegemony. Activist teaching, inspired by this emancipatory pedagogy, flips the classroom dynamics from a hierarchical structure to one that is horizontal and serves the needs of students (Pimlott, 2017).

Another example of activist teaching in the findings concerned education tailored for social movement actors. Cox (2015) illustrates how universities can develop activist-oriented programs, enrolling activists from diverse social movements and creating spaces for collective learning and reflection. Thus, education becomes a critical site for nurturing knowledge and skills that support external movements. However, this approach is sometimes frowned upon, as some fear the potential "contamination" of education by partisan politics (Gordon, 2020).

These kinds of engagements, where hierarchies and boundaries that determine who must be the learner and who the teacher are challenged, touch upon the epistemic regimes that dominate academia. For example, in Paper IV, Trevor Ngwane critiques mainstream educational practices while teaching his students about Bloom's Taxonomy, highlighting how epistemic hierarchies are maintained in academia. His critique highlights the emancipatory logics and aims of activist teaching.

6.1.3. Activist collaborations

The last theme of scholar-activist practices involves building collaborations with grassroots movements and communities. This extends beyond collaborative research to include sharing expertise, resources, skills, and credibility. For example, academics can lend their credibility and power to a protest by publicly supporting it. The findings highlight the different roles scholars take in these collaborations, such as teacher, expert, narrator, or public intellectual (e.g., de Wit et al., 2021; Hern, 2016). The concept of "solidarity" is invoked both explicitly and implicitly in the findings regarding the theme of collaboration. Solidarity acknowledges the unique capacities of each group (activist and academic) and the pursuit of synergy by finding common interests and mutual support (Routledge & Derickson, 2015).

Through activist collaborations, many academics become "organic" to the movement, in line with Gramsci's conception of the organic intellectual (1971), meaning that they put their intellectual capacities at the service of the movement. However, risks arise when the academic voice dominates, potentially silencing the authentic voices of activists – a dynamic known as ventriloquism (Bond, 2015). For many, the scholar-activist's role must remain critical within these collaborative spaces by "speaking truth" not only to power but also to the disempowered (Walsh et al., 2008). Activist collaboration can thus subvert the divide between academia and political struggle, though the risk of perpetuating the same epistemic hierarchy remains (Paper IV).

6.2. Structural conditions

Beyond the agential practices of scholar-activism, structured and entrenched realities persist and impact the sphere of action. Four key structural conditions emerge as either constraining or enabling influences on scholar-activism. This section elaborates on each of them.

6.2.1. Historical and geopolitical context

Scholar-activism is conditioned by both global and localized forces of history and politics. The papers in this thesis demonstrate that the histories of resistance movements (such as the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa or the social movements of the 1960s) and periods of political crisis have left lasting effects on academia and academic practices. Histories of oppression and political struggle transform not only individuals (through embodied experiences of oppression) but also academic practices (for example, radical Marxism co-evolving with resistance movement in South Africa) (Chetty, 2023; Dawson & Sinwell, 2012). This illustrates the historical interdependency between academia and broader political conditions. South African universities, since their inception, were deeply entangled with the Western colonial project, having lasting legacies to this day (Mamdani, 2018).

Context-dependency means that moving across different contexts can create varying experiences and perceptions of scholar-activism. The findings in Paper III show that transnational experiences often create ambivalence in adapting to the norms and risk assessments of different contexts. Political shifts over time also require attention, according to a participant in Paper III: "It's one thing to say, in the abstract, 'Justice for Palestine.' It's another thing to say it during a war, or amid a contentious encampment on campus." This highlights the importance of contextual considerations when adopting scholar-activist practices. "Radicalism" is largely context-dependent (della Porta, 2018). How radical the statement "Justice for Palestine" sounds can vary across historical and geopolitical contexts and, therefore, carry different levels of (perceived and real) risk for scholar-activist practices.

6.2.2. Organizational and disciplinary cultures

The findings of this thesis show that academic cultures influence not only perceptions but also the practices of scholar-activism. Organizational and disciplinary culture refers to patterns of behavior, shared values, and belief systems

among members of an academic organization, field, or discipline (Peterson & Spencer, 1991, in Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Paper III highlights that activism can be received differently across academic environments, depending on whether the culture is supportive of activism or not. Scholars may feel pressure to limit their radical stance, experience marginalization, or even face stigmatization (also shown by Lubitow, 2013). This can lead to conflict between personal and professional identities (Ylijoki, 2008, and supported by Paper III), where what one values may not align with the norms of their academic community. Conversely, organizational cultures, particularly those shaped by activist leadership, can be more receptive and supportive of scholar-activism (Paper III).

Specific norms and values within academic disciplines play a foundational role in shaping how scholar-activism is understood and practiced within particular communities. Studies have shown that, for example, the engineering community may experience more difficulty incorporating political or critical lenses into their projects, whereas transdisciplinary and critical disciplines more readily incorporate such approaches into the mindset of practitioners (examples discussed in Paper I include Skinner et al., 2015; Hauswald, 2021; Lennox & Yıldız, 2020). Tony Becher (1989) uses the term "academic tribes" to describe smaller, distinct worlds within universities, each with its own epistemological forms. These "tribe"-level dynamics serve as an important structural condition directly related to the practices of scholar-activism. Paper IV demonstrates that scholar-activist practices are often enabled within smaller academic spaces, the radical and activist "tribes" in academia, many of which were established by earlier generations of scholar-activists.

6.2.3. Governance and accountability structures

Governance and accountability structures in academia have been strongly shaped by neoliberal pressures, which in turn influence the conditions for academic engagement. Across the four studies, scholar-activists consistently highlight how these pressures shape the conditions for academic engagement. Productivist logics associated with academic capitalism and the entrepreneurial university define the meaning of a "good worker" through measurable outputs (publications, grants, and rankings), which can render scholar-activism as unproductive (de Beer, 2015; Deschner et al., 2020; Pimlott, 2017; Grey, 2013; Petrick, 2015). These pressures are reinforced and formalized through an audit culture, in which systems of accountability, documentation, and performance measurement operate as "political technologies" that both monitor and constrain academic behavior (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 1999: p. 558). Paper IV shows that although activism might be valued within the organization, the economic costs it generates can limit the support available for scholar-activist practices. For example, activist

research projects may prolong student graduation timelines in a system where the institution is rewarded for timely completion of degrees.

On the other hand, Papers III and IV also demonstrate that scholar-activists motivate and legitimize their practices by drawing on institutional discourses of accountability, including notions of third mission, societal impact, or community engagement. These papers show that such discourses can provide resources for legitimizing activist engagement. However, the meaning and operationalization of "impact" vary across national contexts. In the U.K., for example, the impact agenda is closely tied to audit mechanisms through the Research Excellence Framework (Rhodes et al., 2018), reinforcing neoliberal logics. In Sweden, by contrast, the discourse of "impact" as such has not been mobilized in a coherent or systematic way. Instead, notions of samverkan (collaboration) and nyttiggörande (utilization) have been central to articulations of the third mission (Perez Vico, 2018; Bjäre & Perez Vico, 2021). While samverkan has historically been associated with democratization and public education, more recent interpretations have emphasized entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and economic benefit, thus partly reflecting a shift toward logics commonly associated with neoliberal governance (Bjäre & Perez Vico, 2021). These examples suggest that although institutional discourses of accountability are embedded in particular governance regimes and shaped by certain logics, they can offer opportunities to scholars for legitimizing their activist work.

6.2.4. Epistemic regimes

The findings show that, beyond localized epistemic cultures (i.e., disciplines or "academic tribes"), there are broader epistemic regimes that condition how scholar-activism is perceived and practiced. These include intellectual traditions that permeate different academic communities. Edward Shils (1972) defined intellectual tradition as "a set or pattern of beliefs, conceptions of form, sets of verbal (and other symbolic) usages, rules of procedure, recurrently and unilaterally linked with each other through time" (p. 23). Some intellectual traditions, through their distinct assumptions and methodological approaches, offer theoretical grounds for scholar-activism. For instance, a Marxist tradition, with its ideals of revolutionary change, can have a distinct impact on how scholar-activism is legitimized and practiced (Paper IV). Other significant traditions are feminist thought, critical pedagogy, and critical social theory (Paper II).

Another aspect of epistemic regimes concerns the broader systems of knowledge that shape ways of knowing in different societies. Scholars point out that Western intellectual traditions have tended to marginalize alternative ways of knowing as a legitimate site of knowledge and transformation, whereas in many other cultural

contexts, epistemic systems beyond rationality — such religious or indigenous knowledges — continue to play a central role in shaping people's worldviews. Therefore, in those societies, the forms that activism takes can be valued or understood differently.

Paper IV highlights aspects of epistemic injustices that permeate scholar-activist practices (Barnett, 2021; Fricker, 2007). Scholars working in Critical Race Theory refer to "epistemological racism," arguing that "too frequently, an epistemology based on the social history and culture of the dominant race has produced scholarship which portrays people of color as deficient and judges the scholarship produced by scholars of color as biased and nonrigorous" (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 169). The findings show that while scholar-activist practices aim to transform epistemic injustice, pre-existing epistemic regimes continue to shape and permeate these practices.

6.3. Internal and social negotiations

In between structural conditions and scholar-activist practices, scholars engage in internal and social negotiations. These include both subjective and inter-subjective processes through which agents reflect (individually or collectively) on their situation as shaped by structural conditions and evaluate their courses of action. I elaborate on these findings below.

6.3.1. Mobilizing emancipatory motivations

One key dimension shaping the reflexive process related to scholar-activism is the individual's lived experiences with oppression, whether colonialism, apartheid, or patriarchy. These experiences can motivate agents in their political pursuits. As shown in Paper IV and confirmed by Paper I, these personal trajectories are formative to the agent's "radicalization" (e.g., discussed in Shayne & Manfredi, 2019). "Radicalization," employed by scholar-activists in South Africa, means a sharpened understanding of structural injustices, highlighting reflexive encounters with structural oppression.

Archer describes experiences as "embodied practices" that leave memory traces, giving us "the sense of our own continuity" (Archer, 2000, p. 8). The argument is that practice gains primacy in our identity formations and our agency. Although we can reflectively constitute our sense of identity, it cannot be separated from our "placement in society" (Archer, 2000, p. 10). These placements play a crucial role in the sense-making processes and moral judgments of scholar-activists. Paper III

illustrates how scholars constantly invoke their academic privileges as something to be utilized for social movements.

Emancipatory motivations are also influenced by exposure to intellectual traditions in which justice is a central concern (Papers II, III, and IV). There seems to be a link between personal experiences of oppression and the pursuit of intellectual traditions that offer relevant insights into those experiences. Paper IV, for instance, shows how scholar-activists in South Africa mobilized theoretical perspectives that could explain the experiences of injustice along the lines of race and class.

6.3.2. Engaging criticality

Paper II identifies "criticality" as a key feature of scholar-activist practices. This means a critical analysis of the issues at hand and the taken-for-granted assumptions behind dominant narratives. Through critical engagement, one begins to recognize the problems that need to be transformed, such as epistemic injustices (Reynolds et al., 2020). Papers I and IV show how specific intellectual traditions (e.g., Marxism) and methodologies (e.g., PAR), which are relevant to scholar-activist practices, draw on this critical engagement with societal and epistemic structures.

A major sub-theme of critical engagement is self-criticism, also referred to as self-reflexivity in the literature (Paper II). This is key to the formation of scholar-activism; it involves interrogating one's own roles and positions within struggles and within society at large. It is given such weight that, for some, such as Maxey, it is itself a form of scholar-activism (1999). This also helps explain a recurring pattern in the literature on scholar-activism, where writing reflexively— explicitly including the self in the study—is a widely used method among scholar-activists (Paper II).

6.3.3. Navigating legitimacy

The findings highlight that when academic norms are interpreted as colliding with activist norms, scholars must negotiate the legitimacy of their actions. This requires not only subjective negotiations but also inter-subjective negotiations with colleagues, activists, and the broader public. Academics in Paper III describe unspoken rules about what constitutes legitimate forms of scholar-activism: for example, as long as actions are peaceful and lawful, they tend to be considered as legitimate. These negotiations also reflect the culture within specific academic contexts and their openness to engaging with activism.

The delicate balance between adhering to the norms of a credible researcher and engaging in activism is illustrated in Papers III and IV through controversies that expose these tensions. While many scholars personally believe that activism does not induce bias or compromise impartiality in their scholarship, they are conflicted by how society assigns "credibility" to researchers. This contradiction intensifies when credibility is needed as a resource to advance the goals of the movement. This is where scholars engage in boundary-work as a form of social negotiation of legitimacy (Gieryn, 1983). This does not imply merely conforming to existing norms; it can also involve expanding and transforming them (Temper et al., 2018). First-hand accounts show that scholars often engage in a burdensome double workload, by "playing the neoliberal game" and building scientific capital that grants them credibility and authority to challenge the very rules of the game.

6.3.4. Negotiating trust and solidarity

Across the papers, trust emerges as a central theme in social negotiations. In Paper IV, scholars emphasize that forming alliances and collaborations with movement actors depends heavily on cultivating trust, while in Paper I, this process is often framed in terms of solidarity (de Beer, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2020; Routledge & Derickson, 2015). Solidarity carries transformative potential: as Sidney Tarrow (1998) notes, "a recognition of their common interests…translates the potential for a movement into action" (p. 30).

Routledge and Derickson (2015) draw on personal experience to describe how "communities with which we collaborate are interested in engaging in knowledge exchange with scholars with whom they have relationships of trust and mutuality born of situated solidarities developed through convergence spaces created during earlier collaborations." This signals that trust is not only rooted in the epistemic authority or expertise that academics may hold, but also in the sustained relationships built through long-term engagement. In Paper IV, for instance, a community activist referred to a researcher as a "home boy," signaling that the once-outsider scholar had become an insider through immersion in community life and the slow, deliberate work of building trust.

For scholars, trust must be maintained on both sides, both with activists and with academic colleagues. Such trust requires negotiating codes of conduct that balance academic integrity with responsibility to movements. The controversy discussed in Paper IV illustrates this dynamic. Patrick Bond (2015) emphasizes the need for new codes of conduct that can ensure academic integrity in scholar-activist work by remaining truthful and critical to both the academic and the activist communities. These examples across the papers highlight the ongoing negotiation of trust and solidarity in scholar-activist practices.

7. Concluding discussion

It is now time to return to the research questions. This thesis has brought together perspectives from four distinct studies, each examining scholar-activism from a different angle. The synthesis discussed scholar-activism in three interrelated domains: structural conditions, internal and social negotiations, and scholar-activist practices (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The synthesis of the findings
The three domains of the findings organized based on Archer's framework of structure-agency-reflexivity

In response to the first research question on scholar-activist practices, the results reveal not only the practices of scholar-activism themselves but also the underlying qualities, ambitions, and reflexive deliberations that drive them. Scholar-activism goes beyond the overt expressions often associated with stereotypical understandings of activism. It is driven by critical, political, and counter-hegemonic ambitions that inform academic life as a whole. At times, it manifests through subtle classroom interventions that activate agency in students; at other times, it is overt, visible, and contentious.

But which ones are considered contentious and overt? Instead of jumping quickly to superficial answers (such as citing illegal actions like gluing oneself to the ground), we can allow this question to guide us to deeper invisible structures that

are awakened by scholar-activism: the very structures that constrain or enable it. To this end, and in response to the second research question on the underlying conditions shaping scholar-activism, the thesis first drew on empirical material (accounts of scholars, ethnographic observations, and a review of relevant literature) and then mobilized theories from the political sociology of science to substantiate the empirical findings.

The structural conditions that shape scholar-activism are partly related to contemporary academic life. Neoliberal norms and the logics of academic capitalism act as significant constraints for scholar-activism. Beyond these institutional-level norms and logics, scholar-activism is also influenced by academic communities, such as research fields (e.g., critical geography) or research centers. These academic communities can foster cultures that are more open to activism.

Other structural conditions are societal, geopolitical, and historical, such as the legacies of apartheid – that create lasting tendencies. For example, while many scholars in South Africa may find nothing more ethical than activism due to persistent social sufferings, scholars in Sweden might think twice before signing a petition. The point here is not to make haphazard comparisons between actions, but to understand that differing realities govern the lives of academics across sociopolitical contexts that lead to diverse experiences of scholar-activism. This diversity of experiences also applies to individuals within the same context, whose realities can differ vastly. In both Sweden and South Africa, academic's varying positionalities and access to privilege, whether historical, institutional, or personal, shape the conditions of their political engagement.

While structural conditions and courses of action may vary for different scholars, all must engage in some kind of reflexive negotiation between the situations they find themselves in and the practices they choose to pursue. This thesis is specifically proud of its contribution to this area, which corresponds to the third research question on the processes mediating between structural conditions and scholar-activist practices. In this domain, we can see agents' interventions that are less visible than the practices themselves. This is also an area that has been relatively neglected in CR (Archer, 2003; Valente, 2019). This mediatory domain emerges as a hidden dimension of scholar-activism that reflects agential power.

This domain encompasses the internal and social negotiations in which agents engage. It is where structures are bridged to action –where scholars position themselves, draw on past experiences, mobilize emancipatory motivations, and engage in a critical interrogation of the world and the self. It is also where the agents engage socially with their colleagues, activist collaborators, and the public to negotiate the meaning of their roles as scholars, their academic legitimacy, responsibilities, shared values, and priorities. These negotiations, both internal and

social, are predominantly constructivist processes with real implications for scholars' choices of action. Archer (2003) argues that this is where the explanatory power lies. If we disregard these negotiations, we cannot explain how structures turn into action. At best, we can only show correlations, not causation.

Notably, these reflexive processes are inherently fallible. This means that while agents evaluate their circumstances, they may misjudge the situation or just accept that their actions diverge from enabling conditions, understanding that they may need to pay a price for their actions. This can help explain the voluntary precarity that some scholar-activists experience as they weigh the trade-offs related to their activism. For example, in Paper IV, when Trevor Ngwane's term as director was not renewed, he may have misjudged his agential power in the face of structural power. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, he may have anticipated that, at some point, his activism would no longer be tolerated. Indeed, he had previously confronted powerful organizations and faced multiple expulsions.

In summary, instead of a static or clearly delineated practice, scholar-activism unfolds as a dynamic process situated at the intersection of agency and structure. It is not only what scholars do, but where they are positioned and how they perceive and negotiate that position. This dissertation does not seek to resolve the tensions inherent in scholar-activism but to make them visible and analytically productive. In doing so, it resists binary thinking and embraces complexity, contextuality, and contradiction as central features of scholar-activism.

7.1. Key contributions of this thesis

This thesis contributes to the study of scholar-activism in three ways. First, it clarifies and nuances the concept of scholar-activism. The thesis highlights its core features (i.e., criticality, normativity, and activeness) and shows how these translate into practices across teaching, research, and collaboration. In doing so, it provides a framework for distinguishing scholar-activism from adjacent forms, such as transdisciplinary or applied research. While these approaches may share surface similarities, they differ in the depth of critical engagement and the breadth of their practices. For instance, as Franssen (2022) illustrates, transdisciplinary research on climate change can take a *reformist* Green Growth framing or a *transformative* Degrowth framing. The latter resonates more with scholar-activism, since activist science entails a counter-hegemonic orientation. Unlike applied research, scholar-activism is not confined to research alone; it includes a broader engagement, extending activism to all areas of academic life.

A second key contribution of this thesis lies in its application of a political

sociology of science to the study of scholar-activism. Rather than treating scholar-activism as a peripheral or incidental phenomenon, the thesis conceptualizes it as a distinct practice within the broader ecology of academic engagement (Perkmann et al., 2021; Perkmann et al., 2013). This approach enriches the sociology of science in two ways. First, it draws attention to a marginal topic, thereby expanding the field's empirical scope. Second, it brings together constructivist and realist dimensions: drawing on CR ontology and epistemology, the thesis enriches the sociology of science by bridging a longstanding divide. Specifically, it demonstrates how constructivist insights into the contingency of knowledge can be integrated with a realist understanding of objective reality.

Finally, the thesis contributes empirically by broadening our understanding of scholar-activism beyond the dominant knowledge production of the Global North. In Sweden, scholar-activism unfolds within a welfare-statist yet increasingly neoliberal university system, where protections for academic freedom coexist with managerial pressures and performance metrics. In South Africa, by contrast, extreme inequality, colonial legacies, and student precarity make the political stakes of academic engagement much more immediate. This comparison reveals how structural conditions shape the legitimacy and urgency of scholar-activism. In other words, what might be dismissed as "activism" in Sweden can be experienced as a moral necessity in South Africa. These findings highlight the need for either a context-specific understanding of academic integrity or a universal reformulation that accounts for perspectives from outside the privileged Global North.

7.2. Limitations and avenues for future research

This thesis has its limitations, which also point to productive avenues for future research. One limitation concerns the empirical basis of this study, which focuses on two cases: Sweden and South Africa. While this design provides valuable insights into how scholar-activism unfolds in distinct sociopolitical contexts, the findings cannot be generalized to all other contexts. The thesis primarily engages with democratic and semi-democratic contexts. In authoritarian environments, where state surveillance and repression are central, the forms and venues of scholar-activism may look very different, ranging from underground networks and coded forms of resistance to collaborations outside formal academic institutions (Acar & Coşkan, 2020). These settings present unique epistemic challenges: authoritarian dynamics may not only constrain scholar-activism but also limit the

extent to which such practices can be studied and documented. Future research would benefit from extending the analysis to such contexts to broaden our understanding of how academic engagement is shaped under conditions of heightened repression, censorship, and risk.

A second limitation concerns the disciplinary scope of the participants. The study primarily draws on voices from the social sciences, humanities, and interdisciplinary fields. These are disciplines where reflexivity, critique, and normative debates about knowledge production are highly developed, making them fertile ground for exploring scholar-activism. However, this focus leaves underrepresented the experiences of scholars in the natural sciences, medicine, and technical fields, despite their central role in pressing activist arenas such as climate science, public health, and technology ethics. One can expect that the dynamics of scholar-activism in these domains may differ as their disciplinary norms, funding structures, and ties to industry and state agencies are different. Future work could investigate how scholars in STEM, as well as in orthodox business and economics fields, engage with activism, and whether they encounter distinct opportunities, risks, or strategies in negotiating their roles.

Finally, while the thesis incorporates both aspects of structure and agency, the empirical chapters lean toward the agentic dimension of scholar-activism. In practice, this meant focusing on individuals' narratives and negotiations to foreground the perspectives of actors. The structural analysis could benefit from similar empirical explorations. Future research might adopt a structural or historical orientation, for instance, by tracing the evolution of institutional policies, disciplinary paradigms, or international funding priorities over time. Such an approach could complement the analysis presented here by providing evidence of how academic structures shape and constrain scholar-activism.

On a personal note…

My work might be read as an advocacy for more activism in academia, but this is not my intention. I do not see scholar-activism as a solution, nor as a new orthodoxy to be universally embraced. In fact, this is precisely what the concept itself resists. What I would advocate, instead, is for scholars to engage with questions about their roles in a world in crisis.

I began this thesis with a simple yet difficult question: how do scholars make their work meaningful to social struggle? My time spent observing, listening to, and conversing with many inspiring scholar-activists has taught me that they have long grappled with these questions. This is what I find valuable about scholar-activism:

it confronts scholars with the questions of "where, with whom, and how" to engage in order to have a meaningful presence in the world (Temper et al., 2018). I assume that readers of this thesis are asking themselves similar questions about who they want to be in the face of all that is happening in the world.

I also want to acknowledge the contributions and legacies of generations of scholar-activist work. Drawing on years of experience on the ground, scholar-activists have developed methods and tools that enable more ethical and socially responsible forms of scholarship. This thesis would feel incomplete without sharing at least a few of them. In the appendix, you will find a selection of frameworks and tools intended to serve as inspiration. They encourage us to pause, reflect, and rediscover ourselves. My hope is that each of us can find his or her agency and translate it into meaningful action.

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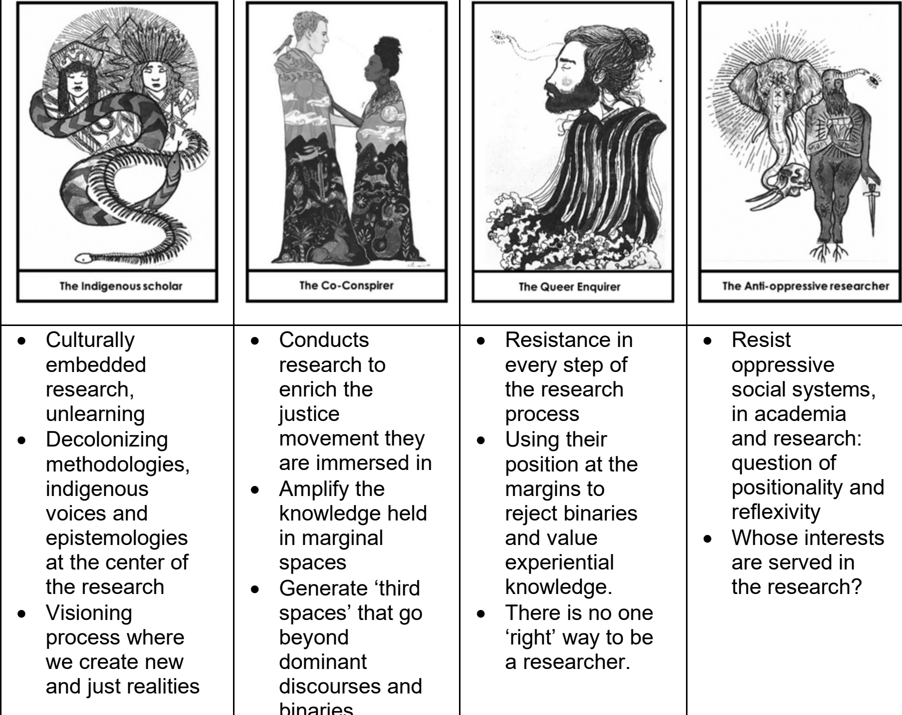
Appendix

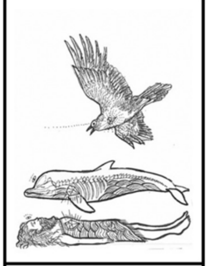
1. Archetypes of transgressive research

Temper, L., McGarry, D., & Weber, L. (2019). From academic to political rigour: Insights from the ‘Tarot’ of transgressive research. *Ecological Economics*, *164*, 106379. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106379

Table A1. The archetypes of scholar-activists, figures from Temper et al., 2019, summaries in the table by the author



The Indigenous scholar	The Co-Conspirer	The Queer Enquirer	The Anti-oppressive researcher
• Culturally embedded research, unlearning • Decolonizing methodologies, indigenous voices and epistemologies at the center of the research • Visioning process where we create new and just realities	• Conducts research to enrich the justice movement they are immersed in • Amplify the knowledge held in marginal spaces • Generate ‘third spaces’ that go beyond dominant discourses and binaries	• Resistance in every step of the research process • Using their position at the margins to reject binaries and value experiential knowledge. • There is no one ‘right’ way to be a researcher.	• Resist oppressive social systems, in academia and research: question of positionality and reflexivity • Whose interests are served in the research?

The Critical Comrade	 The Responsible Participant	The Post-Normal Scientist	The Slow and Care-full scholar
• Committed to help generate knowledge which would be useful to social movements from below • Not only cheerleading, but also critical and aware of the potential tensions	• Participate in and hold a transformative and connective social space of parity, inclusion, reflexivity, empathy and intuitive imaginal thought • Awareness of the tyranny of participation and manipulation	• Deals with uncertainty, power dynamics, urgent need for decisions, • Creativity, imagination and acknowledges her own ignorance. • Needs to go beyond epistemic boundaries	• Seeks to create spaces for care and caring relationships within neoliberal academia • Advocates for slowness not just as a form of resistance but also as a way to improve the quality and depth of scholarship

2. The ten common sins of scholar-activists

Patrick Bond in Amini, B. (2018). Scholactivism: A Roundtable Interview with Ricardo Antunes, Pietro Basso, Patrick Bond, Michael Löwy, José Paulo Netto, and Leo Panitch. *Workplace*, 30, 46-53.

Table A2. The ten 'sins' articulated by Patrick Bond that are frequently committed by scholar-activists

Gatekeeping (or worse, hijacking)	In which a researcher takes ownership of a movement, its interpretation and even access;
Substitutionism	Replacing (not augmenting) the local understanding with the researcher's understanding or vision;
Ventriloquism	Replacing local phrasing with a researcher's own words (in press releases, articles, statements of demands, etc.);
Careerism through parasitism	Exploiting information gained, without reporting back or turning benefits back to the base;
Technicism or legalism	Sometimes necessary to contest an enemy's technicism, but sometimes incapable of comprehending realities, and usually causing premature deradicalisation;
Sectarianism	Favouring or profiling certain factions or individuals in a divisive way;
Hucksterism	Romanticising and overstating the importance of the movement, leader or struggle;
Score-settling	Importing researchers' petty internecine rivalries, causing degeneracy in movement politics as ego-clashing replaces open, honest debate;
Failure of analytical nerve	Inability (often due to fear) to draw out the fully liberatory potentials of the movement and its struggles, or offer comradely critique of those movements;
Betrayal	Turning against the movement, giving confidential information to enemies, or unreasonably acceding to enemy arguments.

3. The care-full academic activism model

Bertella, G. (2022). Care-full academic activism for sustainable transformations in tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *26*(2), 212–223. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2022.2030305

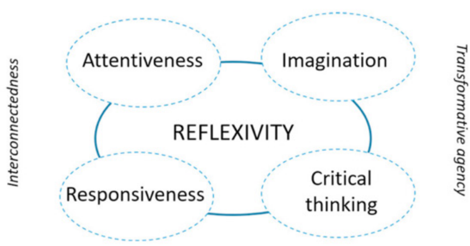


Figure A1. The model for care-full academic-activism developed by Bertella (2022)

Table A3. Questions relevant to scholar-activists for reflecting on their research methodology, by Bertella (2022)

Reflexivity	Who am I? What are my values and beliefs? What is my understanding of sustainability and my perspective on humanity and its future? What is my perspective on non-humans? How do my values, beliefs and perspectives relate to tourism as a phenomenon and an industry? What are my motivations and goals for engaging in this research? What emotions does this research provoke in me? How open am I to the reconsideration of my values, beliefs and perspectives? What are my strengths and weaknesses relevant to this research? How much do I know about and to what extent do I understand the specific context? How am I perceived by those who will be affected by me, my research and its results? How am I perceived by those with whom I will interact during this research? How can I position myself in relation to these others? Do I have the legitimacy to engage in this research?
Attentiveness	Who and what can influence and be influenced by this research and its results? Who are the stakeholders relevant to this research? Who are possible relevant partners? Who can help me to identify the relevant stakeholders? Who can help me gain (more) legitimacy and contextual knowledge relevant to this research? Who can 'speak' for any possible 'silent' stakeholders? How (practically, cognitively, emotionally) and when (short or long term) will those affected by me, my research and its results be so impacted?
Responsiveness	How can possible collaboration compensate for my weaknesses and limitations? How can I include relevant stakeholders' perspectives in this research? To what extent and how can all stakeholders participate in this research? How do I stimulate critical thinking and imagination among research partners and stakeholders?
Imagination	What are my and the stakeholders' perspectives on utopian and dystopian futures? How can sustainability challenges and the urgency to act be communicated to and by the stakeholders? How can sustainability be re-imagined within this research?
Critical thinking	Is there a shared understanding of sustainability among the stakeholders? If not, is it possible, necessary or desirable to achieve it? If so, how? Are there power relations that might support or impede this research? If so, how can I deal with such relations? Who 'owns' this research and its results? How and by whom are the goals, activities and results of the research communicated to the stakeholders? How and to what extent can this research and its results affect the sustainability of the present situation and of possible futures?

4. Triangulating research question

Derickson, K. D., & Routledge, P. (2015). Resourcing Scholar-Activism: Collaboration, Transformation, and the Production of Knowledge. *Professional Geographer*, *67*(1), 1–7.

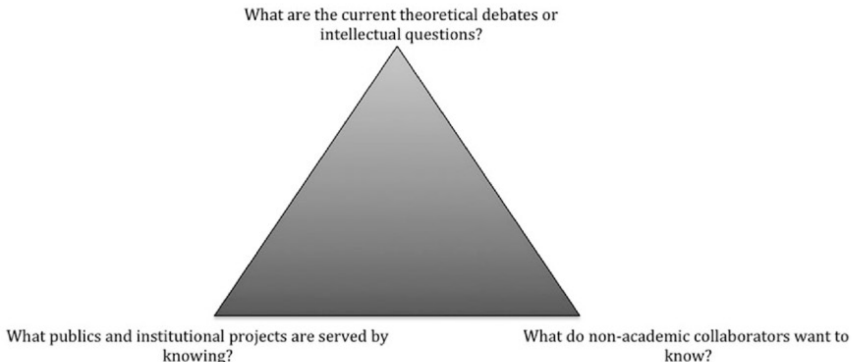


Figure A2. Questions helpful for triangulating the research question, by Derickson & Routledge (2015)

5. From anger to action

Quaye, S. J., Shaw, M. D., & Hill, D. C. (2017). Blending scholar and activist identities: Establishing the need for scholar activism. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *10*(4), 381–399. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000060

Table A4. The 5 steps developed by Quaye and colleagues (2017) to move from anger to action

Step	Description
Step 1 **Accepting anger**	'The first step is admitting that people are angry… Mobilizing one's anger into activism means people must be allowed to feel the full range of their emotions, especially anger. Rather than deflecting anger, people should admit that anger is a necessary and important emotion.'
Step 2 **Creating space for dialogue**	'The second step involves seeing how people collectively and individually enter difficult dialogues. This means creating the space for dialogue to happen by bringing people together to talk, asking people to name their emotions, and validating people's sharing (e.g., snapping one's fingers with points that resonate with them).'
Step 3 **Envisioning**	'The third step is about envisioning, specifically envisioning what a transformed society looks like. Activism can often feel isolating or demoralizing, as changing society seems too daunting. Participants should dream of what they want society to look like. Activists engage because they believe a different society is possible'
Step 4 **Participating in dialogue**	'Step four is actually participating in the dialogue. Participants talk through challenges of the society they envisioned in the previous step and listen to the collective voices in the space'
Step 5 **Strategizing and planning**	'The final step is strategizing and planning actions. Some actions might appear smaller, while others might be grander. The point here is not to judge the scale of actions, but instead, to plan together.'

6. The roles of scholars in transdisciplinary research

Wittmayer, J. M., & Schäpke, N. (2014). Action, research and participation: roles of researchers in sustainability transitions. *Sustainability Science*, 9(4), 483–496. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-014-0258-4

Table A5. The different roles of scholars in action-oriented and transdisciplinary research, developed by Wittmayer & Schäpke (2014)

Reflective scientist	Analyses dynamics and actors; Provides knowledge on the basis of analysis; Analyses outcomes; Observes, reflects and analyses actions
Process facilitator	Initiates process, Selects participants, Facilitates process, Encourages expression of all viewpoints
Change agent	Motivates participants, Empowers participants to lead/own the process, Initiates and participates in a learning journey based on sustainability values, Networks with stakeholders outside the group, Participates in process and experiments, Supports policy formulation
Knowledge broker	Supports in making sustainability meaningful in a given context, Provides space for critical reflection, Mediates different perspectives
Self-reflexive scientist	Engages in a (self-) reflexive practice with regard to own normative orientation, engages in self-reflexive practice with regard to internal and external power dynamics