

Building Bridges: Participatory and Emancipatory Methodologies with Indigenous Communities Affected by the Oil Industry

María Teresa Martínez Domínguez
Strathclyde University, Glasgow
teresa.md@googlemail.com

Abstract

The Amazonian oil conflict and the different actors involved in the oil politics of the region represent a challenging environment for the social researcher and a unique opportunity to create new avenues where western and indigenous understandings can coexist. The paper explains how using anti-oppressive approaches can contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge and also describes the limitations encountered by the researcher in applying this approach. The actors involved in the oil conflict are categorised in three groups: the survivors, the powerful and the intermediaries, based on their power relation dynamics. A variety of methods are discussed showing the adaptability and flexibility required from the researcher and participants in order to work with a wide range of actors in a politically and culturally sensitive environment, where the ethics of research practices need to be constantly re-evaluated. Issues of access and trust building with those groups are discussed and special attention is given to, what I call, a 'Building Bridges' methodology created in collaboration with the indigenous groups as an emancipatory and reflective process for both the researcher and participants. A framework for a Building Bridges methodology is also presented through the four principles of: relationships, reciprocity, participation and emancipation,

Introduction

This paper is based on the methods and theoretical framework I used during my seven months of doctoral fieldwork in Ecuador and Peru doing research with the indigenous Amazonian communities affected by the oil industry. My research seeks to identify the 'survival mechanisms' used by indigenous people, consciously and unconsciously, when faced with the impacts of multinational and national oil companies on their lives and their environment (Martínez, 2008). In doing so, I critically analyse the influence of the different actors involved in the oil conflict and on the indigenous people's survival process. Among the possible outcomes of the research are: to contribute to the understanding of possible ways forward to stop the cultural and biological extinction of indigenous groups affected by the oil industry; to inform local and international policy development about the impacts of some industries on indigenous people; to ensure the voices and views of indigenous groups are heard and inform social policy and practice; and finally to contribute to critical realist theory by investigating the actors, power structures and mechanisms influencing the process and, in particular, the indigenous people's conceptions of oppression and struggle and how these inform their actions.

In order to better answer the question of survival, I decided to work with indigenous groups and communities that were in different stages of their struggle against the oil industry: The Cofan People from Dureno, the Kichwa People from Sarayacu in Ecuador, and the Shipibo-Konibo People from Canaan de Cachiyaku in Peru.

This paper starts by explaining the theoretical framework, which is based on critical and non-oppressive approaches and guided the design of the methodology and informed the ethics. Next, I describe how I identified, categorised and accessed the different actors involved in the oil conflict, whom I call the 'survivors', the 'powerful' and the 'intermediaries'. The powerful include the State and trans-national oil companies, State institutions, public relations companies, the military and foreign governments. The survivors were the indigenous people and their local, regional and national organisations and settler organisations. The intermediaries include local, national and international NGOs, the Church, local councils, activists, academics and some indigenous governmental institutions.¹

I detail the methods employed in the research giving special attention to the differences between interviewing the powerful and the indigenous people, and the use of participatory research methods as an emancipatory and reflective process for the participants and myself.

I explain how I used a 'bottom-up' approach to build trust with the indigenous groups and a 'top-down' approach to access the powerful. Then I describe the 'Building Bridges' methodology, designed together with the indigenous communities in an attempt to bring together the knowledge of the researcher and indigenous knowledge. The ethical principles for this research project were based on three sources. Firstly, ethical guidelines proposed by the communities formed the back bone, secondly, the British Sociological Association, and finally, guidelines suggested by indigenous researchers (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and other scholars who have used participatory approaches when working with indigenous people and knowledge (Grenier, 1998; Sillitoe, 2002; Tacchi, 2003).

Towards a Common Ground: Critical and Anti-oppressive Approaches

My research falls in the category of 'research from the margins' as Brown and Strega (2005, p. 7) describe it:

"Research of the margins is not the research of the marginalised but research by, for, and with them/us. It is research that takes seriously and seeks to trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes. It seeks to reclaim and incorporate the personal and political context of knowledge construction. It attempts to foster oppositional discourses, ways

¹ These categories (survivors, powerful and intermediaries) are based on the dynamics of power relations of the actors involved in the oil conflict, the powerful being those with a greater control of these dynamics and the main driving force of oppression. For more on how these actors can shift categories and the power dynamics between the powerful, indigenous people and development agencies read Blasser, 2004; Makuriwa, 2007. The term survivors has been intentionally chosen instead of the terms powerless, oppressed or victims (Williams, 1998; Martínez 2008).

of talking about research, and research processes that explicitly and implicitly challenge relations of domination and subordination....”

During the research I followed critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches (Brown and Strega, 2005; Shukaitis, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This approach aims to promote and produce research that is political in essence and committed to decolonised knowledge, respecting and welcoming what has been called ‘other ways of knowing, being and doing’. Indigenous knowledge is one form of knowledge which might have been marginalised by traditional social science (Brown and Strega, 2005, p. 5).

It can be difficult for social scientists to find a balance between creating research projects that investigate marginalised outlooks while, simultaneously, working within a paradigm that continues to be predominantly Western-centric. Even critical research, aimed at benefiting the oppressed, has on certain occasions failed to take account of the knowledge, views and needs of the subjects of study. This has been particularly prevalent in research done with indigenous people or research focussed on policies and practices that may directly affect such groups (Nielsen, 2007, p. 2). Failure to recognise the ownership of knowledge by indigenous people and to create new avenues where western and indigenous approaches to research can meet, perpetuates the status quo of dominant science and results in an ‘academic colonialism’ often hidden under the name of critical research (Mihesuah, 2005).

What follows is an account of how critical, non-oppressive and indigenous approaches inform all the stages of my fieldwork, from how to identify, select and access the participants to the use of emancipatory and participatory methods and overall to the design of the Building Bridges methodology. The paper also describes the difficulties and contradictions I encountered applying these principles in the process of becoming a non-oppressive researcher.

The Amazon Oil Conflict: Identifying the Actors and Selecting the Participants

The development of the oil industry in the Amazon area has been and still is one of the factors responsible for the cultural extinction of indigenous people. Oil operations in Ecuador and Peru have been carried out without consultation with the indigenous groups that it affects, with fraudulent environmental impact assessments and a general disregard of the social impacts. The oil companies and the State know entire groups and cultures may be at risk and nevertheless economic development is put before the survival of indigenous groups (a historical overview of the oil development in Ecuador and Peru and specific conflicts between indigenous communities, the State and oil corporations can be found in Acosta, 2000; Almeida, 2003; López, 2007; Perreault, 2001).

My research privileges indigenous voices over other dominant voices. Nevertheless, in order to study and better understand the survival mechanisms used by indigenous people to face the impacts of the oil industry, we considered it necessary to include the points of view and strategies used by both the powerful and indigenous people. This decision was taken in agreement with my informants who helped me to design the fieldwork methodology.

Additionally, there is also a lack of critical research about the powerful, and the need to 'study up' (Nader, 1974; Williams, 1989) has not been fully addressed. This lack of critical research is accentuated by the commodification of research and the difficulties that researchers have encountered in attempting to scrutinise and access state and corporate power (Tombs and Whyte, 2003). There is a whole range of actors involved in the oil conflict, my first step was to select the indigenous groups or survivors, and from there, to approach the other actors. Once access was gained, however, the study was multi-method in its approach.

Accessing The 'Survivors' and Building Trust: The Bottom-up Approach

I share the views of scholars who have faithfully described oil politics while avoiding romanticising indigenous communities or presenting them as the representatives of wilderness and conservation strategies (Sabin, 1998). Most indigenous families in oil production areas have had a member working for the industry, although normally in temporary and non-skilled jobs, but many saw the oil boom in the 1970s as an opportunity to survive in an increasingly market based economy. However, after more than 60 years of oil exploitation in Ecuador, the indigenous people of the central region of Pastaza have witnessed the frenetic oil development in the eastern region of Oriente since the 1970s, its impacts on such populations as the Secoya and Cofan, which are on the brink of extinction, and the disappearance of entire groups such as the Tetetes, and this has made the Pastaza people reluctant to follow the same path of development.

I worked with groups and communities that have used various ways of resisting, negotiating or liaising with the industry and I decided to access these communities with a bottom-up approach. Due to my previous work in Ecuador and Peru I had contacts with local, regional and national indigenous organisations but I first contacted the local organisations because these are the ones closest to the communities. For some communities it may seem oppressive when the first contact is done through their national bodies which do not necessarily represent their needs and views. For this reason approval was sought from the community assemblies in the first instance.

I started to build trust with the Cofan People even before I started my PhD. I not only had the opportunity to work with them through my previous work with Friends of the Earth Scotland, but I also helped them to produce a short documentary called "The Shaman's Oil: Resistance and Cosmivision of the Cofans". Filming also acted as a bridge between my previous relation with them as a development worker and my possible future relation as a researcher, and was the basis of the Building Bridges methodology explained later on. The Cofan community assembly agreed to participate in the study and help me to formulate the research. My main informant was one of the coordinators of the Cofan Youth Organisation. He opened all the doors for me and got very involved in the research from the beginning, offering to let me stay with his family while I was doing

research in his community and recommending me to indigenous leaders from Sarayaku in order to facilitate my access to this community.²

I believe the Cofans felt this research was a continuation of the work I did while producing the documentary, a next step in understanding the causes of oppression, their situation in the globalised world and what actions needed to be taken. Although we designed a methodology based on participatory methods, the research I undertook was not conceived as an action research project. Nevertheless, one of the decisions the community made was to develop a long-term action research project with Cofan and Ecuadorian researchers to evaluate what is the way forward for their cultural survival, and I was to take the role as an advisor in this project.

Building trust with the Sarayaku People was more complex. The struggle and the strong pressure that they have been through during the past six years since 2003 with the Argentine company CGC, which carried out seismic tests in their territory without previous consent of Sarayaku, has put them in the public eye of researchers, activists and journalists. Eventually, they formulated a code of conduct for visitors to the community, as the community claims to have been victims of espionage by PR people hired by the oil company masquerading as journalists.

In the light of these events I made contact with NGOs, which work with the Sarayaku community, and also with Sarayaku people now living in urban areas. These links helped me to access what I call the Sarayaku 'circle of confidence' and to be invited to various events. The film I had made with the Cofans was always an excellent calling card, and the fact that I was 'recommended' by the Cofans helped too. In order to gain the trust of the community I had to be there not only as a researcher but also as an advocate scholar participating in their struggle, and I did not hesitate to play the role of international witness when a violation of human rights was taking place.

Once I was invited to the community, the only way to enter was in a two-seater aircraft, using the old landing strip built by the Evangelical Church in the 1970's. I flew with the most respected Shaman in Sarayaku, but even with him close to me I knew I was an outsider approaching a community engaged in resistance, and I had no idea if I was going to be accepted.

My previous experience of living and working in indigenous communities was very helpful. I empathised with the women quickly, as I knew about the long process of preparing chicha (traditional drink done by women) and how to make a fire using three tree-trunks, and I could easily sleep on the floor and eat their food. It was evident that I knew how to live there and respect their rules and customs. This does not mean it was easy for me. It is very demanding and tiring to live in a culture that is not your own for a long period of time (dé Ihstar, 2005, p. 360).

Nevertheless, my learned skills were not enough, and on the first night of my stay in Sarayaku I was taken into a meeting where I was questioned about my research, values, ethical guidelines, and even my political knowledge of Marxism. They were very worried that I could be a sociologist or a journalist working for the oil company. After this meeting I finally felt accepted, and we started to work together. I had no main informant there, but a whole group of people facilitated the

² For more on access through gatekeepers, and first contact with the fieldwork area refer to Campbell, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Whyte, 1955.

process for me and got involved in the research. Among them were significant leaders, elders and young members of the community.

Building trust with the Shipibo-Konibo People was again different and challenging. I contacted them through an environmental activist who had worked with them during the previous year. They were immediately interested in the research, and happy to know that their struggle was gaining international attention. This openness was also because they had not been subjected to the same level of external pressure and media coverage as the Sarayaku people, being therefore less suspicious of researchers and also more likely to believe that direct benefits for them could result from the research.

My main informant there was one of the indigenous advisors of FECONBU (Federation of Native Communities of the Low Ucayali in Peru). Both he and my contact from the Cofan Nation said they were happy to be gatekeepers of the research and considered it their duty towards their communities. Both are quite young, but have been leading the resistance in their communities, and I believe my presence there reinforced their role in the community. For me it was very empowering to work with them; their commitment towards their people, their knowledge of the oil conflict and their willingness to participate and develop the research inspired me throughout my fieldwork period and afterwards.

Accessing the Powerful and Building Trust: The Top-down Approach

Once I had gained access to the indigenous participant groups, I started to contact the local, regional and national actors involved in the relevant oil conflicts. I decided to use a top-down approach to access the Powerful, because it was usually useless to try to arrange an interview at the local level if they did not have the approval from headquarters. One of the factors to bear in mind while accessing the Powerful is that they are interconnected, therefore it is important to have a coherent and similar discourse with all the different people and institutions.

My first contact was always by e-mail, and if this failed, by letter, fax and telephone. In some cases the only possible way to access them was by going directly to their headquarters. The first contact with the institution is very important, and this is normally through the secretary and sometimes the caretaker of the building. I learnt to be assertive with my messages and flexible in the way I described my research depending on the person I talked to and how much information they wanted about the research and myself. If empathy is not created at this level it is difficult to access someone at executive level. I managed to get an interview with the deputy minister of Energy and Mines in Ecuador thanks to a receptionist, who got me a slot to talk with the deputy minister's secretary, and after she and I had talked for an hour, not just about my research but about her husband, children and whole family, she was surprised to find out that the oil industry could have an impact on the life and survival of indigenous people. She was moved by this fact and that I was travelling alone without my family, so she decided she would get me an interview.

I took some precautionary measures when I tried to access the State representatives and the oil corporations. For example I used a different name and e-mail address, and I removed all my profiles from the internet. I thought this was

especially necessary in Ecuador, where one of my participant groups, the Cofan, live in the border region with Colombia, where the oilfields are quite militarised and surrounded by paramilitary and guerrilla groups. Also, in both countries, I had heard about environmental activists and researchers being threatened, prosecuted or even murdered (Oilwatch, 2002). I have also witnessed myself, how activists and peasants are persecuted by public armed forces and private ones hired by oil companies. I took these precautions to protect my informants and myself.

My introductory letters to the powerful were carefully designed and I never lied about my student status. Indeed, I thought that my student status might even be a benefit presenting me in a non-threatening fashion. However, I was careful in explaining my views, the purpose and scope of my research and my relationship with indigenous groups. I used a non-threatening approach and emphasised my genuine interest in having their point of view, as it was vital for the objectivity of the research. In addition, their involvement in the research would give them a better understanding of the roots and dynamics of the oil conflict and possible conflict resolution strategies. Although the purpose of my research was not to help them to analyse and develop conflict resolution strategies, one should not confuse honesty with naïveté, or ethics with a closed door; as my experience has shown me it would not have been possible to get credible information from some of the powerful actors without using a certain level of distancing or selective communication with them. In every case, the anonymity of the researched person was kept, but they did not have any veto control over the research.

The first interview I managed to get with the powerful was with one of the high rank representatives at Perupetro (a private, State run company that promotes the advancement of hydrocarbon exploration and production activities in Peru). He also invited me to the next round of consultations regarding the new exploration contract signed with the North American company Amerada Hess. One of the exploration blocks included in the territory of the Shipibo-Konibo People. This was a unique opportunity for me to experience, at first hand, the dynamics between all the different actors involved in the oil conflict. During the interview, the representative at Perupetro made various subtle attempts to get me on his side. For example, he offered to pay my travel expenses for my attendance at the consultation meetings, but in return, it was expected I would tell the story from their perspective. It was my first interview with the powerful and my first experience of the subtle forms of persuasion used by the some of those with oil interests in an attempt to influence my research findings. After that, I expressed my desire to be intellectually and economically independent at all times during the research, but I knew that from then onwards I would be scrutinized more carefully.

During the consultation workshops the industry and indigenous people were present in the same context and space, and it was difficult for me to maintain the level of trust simultaneously with both the powerful and the indigenous people. There were occasions when some of the indigenous people coming to these meetings who did not know me thought I was working for the company. Also, by the end of my fieldwork there, the representative of Perupetro realised that I had given him only partial information about my research when I had first approached him. Luckily, I managed to solve these situations successfully by honestly answering any questions they had and trying to avoid conversations with the industry in front of indigenous people and vice versa.

It might seem one-sided and even unfair that I did not provide the same transparency regarding my research and its aims and objectives to the powerful as I did to the indigenous people. Furthermore, I had not allowed the powerful the opportunity to be involved in research design like I had with the indigenous people. There are some authors, especially within feminist research, who have highlighted the need to carry out emancipatory research with the powerful (Neal, 1995) and the use of “transformational elite interviews” (Kezar, 2003). These authors also warn us about the difficulties and potential impossibility of following these approaches in certain settings. Other interpretative researchers have raised their voices against the informed consent requisites, and claim that secrecy and the use of ‘selective communication’ should be understood through cultural contexts, meanings, and practices where fieldwork relations are constantly reinterpreted (Richard, 1993).

The powerful are not exempt from public scrutiny or accountability. If they do not provide information when confronted with critical and independent research, they leave us researchers with very few options. I also think that as a researcher who tries to follow critical, indigenous and non-oppressive approaches I should privilege the voice of the marginalised and be committed to principles of social justice: in this case the use of selective communication with the powerful was justified as a means of achieving it.

Accessing the Intermediaries and Building Trust

The groups in this category were relatively easy to access, with the exception of some NGOs, which were cautious about the amount of information and contacts they would share. There are a number of possible reasons for this behaviour: they might have had a confidentiality agreement with the indigenous communities; ethical guidelines that prevented them from passing information about the communities they work with; fears that the researcher could have jeopardised their relation with the community and access to future funding (if the researcher paints the NGO in a bad light); or they might have simply been too busy to spend time with another student. I had to design letters from different perspectives depending on the affiliation of the NGOs and institutions (environmental or conservationist, religious or non-religious, neoliberal or anti-neoliberal).

Overall I was welcomed into most of these organisations, although at times it was difficult to build trust and gain full acceptance, especially with some of the more politically radical staff members. Based on my fieldwork relationships and the interviews I carried out with these organisations I believe this rejection has to do with what I call the ‘projection of the colonised’; a defence mechanism by which they could prevent the white European coloniser (in this case, me), from misrepresenting their people, information and ideas through my research. They might have envisaged a situation whereby the indigenous communities’ story is told from a single-minded white perspective, primarily for the sake of getting a doctoral degree for my own benefit. Once they realised I shared some of their political ideas, values and ways of approaching research, these defence mechanisms were gradually eroded, even so there were several occasions where I felt left out for being Spanish and European.

Some authors have also described similar “tensions” or “frictions” within development organisations in Latin America and Europe (Tsing, 2004 as cited in Bebbington, 2005, p.4), their relationship being contradictory when confronting issues such as independence, decision-making, collaboration, solidarity or rejection.

Multiple Methods: Researching the Powerful and the Survivors

Although the bulk of my data comes from individual interviews, I used other forms of data in order to triangulate, contrast and complement my data. When researching the powerful my main data collection methods were participant observation and individual and group interviews. I used a wider range of traditional and participatory research methods while doing research in indigenous communities and every method was discussed and/or proposed by the participants. Besides individual interviews and focus group discussions I used participant observation, informal conversations, fieldwork guided walks, video recording, fieldwork diaries and notes, local stories and folklore, local histories, secondary data and an online blog (Tacchi, 2003, p. 28). In this section I will focus on some of the practicalities and tips I learnt and the difficulties encountered while using these methods.

I used participant observation methods while staying with indigenous communities and attending social and political events where many of the stakeholders involved in the oil conflict were present. This method was particularly useful during the consultation meetings between the State, the oil industry and indigenous people, as they could be three to four days long, and it was a good opportunity to observe the dynamics between the actors. I recorded these observations in two fieldwork diaries and three notebooks. I also used a mini-disc recorder and a camcorder at times, although the latter proved to be an intrusive method in this particular setting, and led to mistrust on the part of the powerful and some of the indigenous people that did not know me. I also used participant observation methods to record the indigenous people’s storytelling, folklore and informal conversations. I found these methods particularly useful when living and talking with the women and elders in the community, as the interview was a stressful and alien method for some of them. I gathered useful data while cooking, sharing chicha or walking in the forest with the women. Each night under the flickering candle-light I tried to keep a record in my diary of the conversations, stories and songs heard during the day.

I tried to keep a blog during my fieldwork, depending on my access to the Internet. Only a few people had access to the blog besides my supervisors, as I did not want the blog to become public for security and ethical reasons. It was also a way of forcing me to think of an ‘audience’ when writing about my fieldwork experiences. The blog helped me to make deeper and more general sense of what was happening and be more reflective. After the fieldwork period, the blog evolved into a tool for keeping in touch and receiving comments and feedback from some of the research participants and the ‘community of knowledge’ I created. I have also developed a ‘resistance’ section on the blog where indigenous groups can report their struggles and negotiation processes with the oil industries. In this

sense the blog offered an opportunity to increase the participation of the respondents and increase the potential emancipatory impact of the study.

During my interviews and conversations with indigenous people one of the recurrent themes was the lack of information about the implications of becoming involved in the consultation processes regarding oil exploration and exploitation in indigenous territories and the right to free and informed consent as stated in the International Labour Convention 169. I had a successful previous experience of doing a short documentary about the Cofan people, and some indigenous people and communities asked me if I could do one on the topic of 'prior and informed consultation'. I was in a privileged position to do the film as I had gained access to the communities and also been invited to the consultation events by State representatives. Nevertheless, I told the communities that I could not guarantee the completion of the video project as I had funding and time limitations and did not have the permission of the companies or the State to film these events. We agreed to use video-recording as a research method and eventually we managed to gather enough footage to make a documentary although at the time of writing this footage still required editing. I believe documentaries could be one of the practical outcomes of the research, and the communities felt that it could be an important tool. Although filming can be a sensitive issue for some communities I worked with indigenous groups and leaders who had previously used this medium for their own struggles and campaigns. In all the cases each participant gave previous and informed consent to be filmed. My main concern was to be inclusive and represent all the views. The male young leaders were the most interested in the documentary and this could lead to under-representation of the views of the women and the elders.

Furthermore, I tried to use the interviews as an emancipatory method by encouraging self-reflection and potentially influencing future action in the participants. I also carried out interviews with staff representatives of seven different companies, but none of them agreed to be filmed. As explained above, it was very difficult to carry out transformational and collaborative interviews with the powerful. Although little research has been done on the powerful, the literature contains accounts of the difficulties encountered by researchers "studying up", and the techniques they used to access and interview the powerful in different settings. These accounts vary from pre-feminist to reflective and empowering approaches to elite interviewing (Dexter, 1970; Spencer, 1982). On the most radical end of the spectrum are authors such as Routledge (2002, p. 1), who justifies deception as a mean to find a common ground between the researcher and those who resist the powerful.

During the research with the powerful it often proved difficult to gain the depth of data that I desired. Sometimes I was promised a one-hour interview, but in reality was only able to carry out a twenty minute interview. In these instances it was problematic to build trust and empathy. I used semi-structured interviews with the powerful when possible, but sometimes I had to opt for a more focused interview style as it was very difficult to keep any kind of structure. At other times it was respondents would speak in a monologue, so the researcher has to be very aware of the right moment to take the chance, to use prompts and ask relevant questions. This situation can worsen if tape-recording is not possible or if it is in a setting (such as an oilfield) where taking notes is complicated. In my experience,

when gathering data in this kind of environment it is paramount to develop skills before by interviewing powerful people working in less demanding environments.

Interviewees will form an opinion of the interviewer in the first minutes, and accordingly a researcher must aim to make a suitable impression from the start, so for instance, appropriate dress is important (Smart, 1984). When starting an interview I tried to be very assertive about who I was, what my research was about, why the interview was relevant for me and why their collaboration was important. During the interview I tried to make them feel in control, not showing my knowledge about the topic and not threatening them with my views unless it was in order to get specific information from the respondents. I tried to be critical with my prompts when possible, but this could easily lead to mistrust and poor data, so in order to get-a-long and create a convivial atmosphere I used words that would show my assumed neutrality and professionalism, nodding to show apparent approval of any statement they considered 'the truth'. I always ended by thanking the interviewee, offering a copy of the recording (if one was made) and a summary report of the research when finished, and asking if it would be possible for them to give me some feedback.

The following remarks focus on my work with indigenous people, although some of them could be applied to interviews with other marginalised groups. I started the interviews by reminding them about the purpose of the research, and why their collaboration was valuable. I did not impose a schedule for the interview and we agreed to use focused interviews and open-ended questions. This was the best way to see the world through their eyes, as my way of conceptualising and framing questions differed significantly from theirs. The establishment of rapport was very important, and rapport was built in various stages as the interview progressed (Spradley, 1979). Trying to use the interview as an emancipatory and reflective process and asking them how they felt during the interview helped build the required rapport.

If possible I always tried to interview indigenous people in their own language. Extra effort was made if the respondents did not feel comfortable speaking Spanish and this was often the case when interviewing some of the indigenous women and elders. A researcher has to be aware of the difficulty of constructing knowledge in a language different from one's mother tongue (Kovach, 2005, p.25); I therefore had collaborators translating for me but they were not always available and the translation was not always accurate. This meant I had to rely on indigenous people's willingness to talk in Spanish, on my limited knowledge of their own languages, and on their body language. It is also of paramount importance that the researcher recognises that certain words or phrases might not be culturally meaningful to certain groups. For example, I encountered problems using the word 'successful' to describe actions or events, so I decided to use 'happy' or 'useful'. I was sensitive to the issue of body language and ensured that I did not use any gesticulations that were culturally inappropriate for the indigenous peoples. I concluded the interviews by thanking them for their valuable insights and collaboration, and asking them if it would be possible to come back to them if necessary and if they would like to take part in the analysis process.

Working with the Oppressed: A Building Bridges Methodology

The idea of calling the methodology Building Bridges came from a conversation in the house of an elder from one of the indigenous communities. I was staying at the other side of the river, so to go to her place I had to cross a bridge. Once I arrived she offered me chicha, and we started talking with the help of another elder who translated the conversation into Spanish. I asked the elder if she knew why I was there, and the purpose of my visit. She said (personal communication, March 2007):

"...yes, you are here because you want to know about our experiences with the oil companies, and you want to hear the opinion of the women and the elders as well, so if you want to do something that is good for us too, this is the way...you have to cross the bridge and visit me in my house... you look, and listen, and respect...and then we talk...it's good that we come together in this way and that you visit us, this is the way to do it...together"

I understood that my methodology should be about connecting two different ways of "knowing and being": the perspective of the colonised and the perspective of the white woman researcher living in the colonising society (dé Ishtar, 2005). In addition to linking the two perspectives the approach should also be non-oppressive and contribute to the 'decolonisation of knowledge'. There were many commonalities in our approach and values, so taking in account both perspectives, and after discussing with some of the participants of each indigenous group about what kind of methodology we should use for the research, we decided that the methodology would be guided by the following working and ethical principles: *relationships, reciprocity, participation* and *emancipation*.

Relationships was understood here as a genuine interest in getting to know the people I was working with, not only the main informants and participants but the community as a whole. The aim is that these relationships evolve and endure with time, and could become lifetime relationships. *Reciprocity* was based on supporting each other so that we could all gain from the research and the relationships. Central to this principle was ensuring that the community would benefit from the research as well as me. The benefits are based in both the outcomes and the actual process of the research (Potts and Brown, 2005, p. 260), with the common goal of emancipation for the researcher and participants. *Participation* is understood in two ways. On the one hand, the researcher was to participate and engage in the various cultural and political activities of the communities, and on the other hand the community members becoming collaborators in the research, and not merely objects of the research. There were various degrees of participation depending on the will of each community and individual.

Emancipation, again is mutual, but is also political. The journey towards becoming an anti-oppressive researcher is emancipatory in itself, and although one may not always achieve this goal through the research process it will help us to expose relations of domination and become more mindful and critical. The emancipatory process of the communities through the research should contribute to their self-determination and the decolonisation of research. For example, the interview process should be emancipatory and the knowledge built through the

research should be recognised as belonging to participants. I tried to follow these principles while working with indigenous groups, but it was not easy to become an anti-oppressive researcher, and the difficulties I encountered were mainly founded in my own constraints.

Three emerging characteristics of anti-oppressive research have been described by Potts and Brown (2005, pp. 260-262):

“[first] Anti-oppressive research is social justice and resistance in process and outcome...[second] recognises that all knowledge is socially constructed and political...[third] is all about power and relationships, breaking the power relations that prevent the participants from getting involved and from having some measure of control over the research process.”

So it is not just about empathising with the concept of anti-oppressive research and having good intentions; it is also taking action and being open to other theoretical frameworks and approaches that can foster emancipation (Potts and Brown, 2005, p. 260). For example, my original research topic was ‘coping mechanisms of indigenous people affected by the oil industry’, but ‘survival mechanisms’ was to replace ‘coping mechanisms’, as the concept of ‘coping’ was alien to indigenous people, and was perceived as ‘defeat’, while survival was something to celebrate. Nevertheless, I still had a major influence on the topic, the scope, and the selection of the participant groups and organisations.

Conclusion

Doing non-oppressive research not only implies using participatory and emancipatory approaches with the research participants, but also a commitment to unmask the causes of oppression. This is why I decided, in agreement with my informants, to include in the research the points of view and the strategies used by, not only what I have called the survivors, but the powerful and the intermediaries.

Although colonial approaches to fieldwork are no longer accepted in social research, it is still very common to find researchers who are disrespectful of the rights of indigenous people in the way they carry out research. Indigenous people have probably been the most ‘abused’ subjects of research by traditional European-based social science (Nielsen, 2007, p. 1). Lack of participation and ownership of knowledge and lack of benefits for the subjects of research, are some of the most criticised aspects of traditional Western research when studying indigenous people. However, in order to address these faults, more non-oppressive research is needed where different “ways of knowing” can coexist and new methodologies can arise from this relationship.

The Building Bridges methodology, which is based on principles of mutual respect, tries to achieve this by seeking the emancipation of both the researcher and the research participant. This way the researcher/researched divide can evolve from an active-passive role to a scenario where these roles are constantly reinterpreted in order to achieve a more egalitarian and mutually respectful relationship. The result is a win-win situation for both and for the construction of

knowledge, which is no longer limited and controlled by the traditional Western research approach.

However becoming a non-oppressive researcher is difficult and can take over the researcher's whole life. I encountered many constraints doing non-oppressive research, for example time and funding limitations affected my ability to build genuine relationships and engage the participants in all the stages of the research. It was also challenging to maintain the level of empathy during seven months of intense fieldwork, which required working with a variety of actors and cultures.

In the case of conflicts driven by resource exploitation there is a need for future studies on the powerful, where not only their bad practices are exposed, but also new avenues are sought to engage them in the participatory research. Participatory research with the powerful actors could prove to foster obligations of accountability towards the indigenous communities that are affected by their activities. Future research in communities should be used to the advantage of the participants, especially when we carry out research with groups that have been historically marginalised or continue to be marginalised. If possible, we should also extend this premise to our fieldwork, during which practical and recognised benefits for the communities can be achieved. This can be done in many different ways; for example designing a methodology in collaboration with the research participants, disseminating the research using formats that can be used directly by the communities (story telling, documentaries, summary reports and leaflets, "theatre of the oppressed" and so on). This way, the research breaks the oppression of the dominant paradigm and becomes resistance and transgression in itself.

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