Co-creating Actionable Science

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Reflections from the Global North and South

Edited by

Gloria L. Gallardo Fernández,
Fred Saunders and Tatiana Sokolova

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-4847-3
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4847-3

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FOREWORD

KERI FACER[1]

Working in partnership with organisations and communities outside the walls of the university is, today, a central part of much new thinking and practice in the social sciences, arts and humanities, especially in relation to the broad area of climate change, biodiversity depletion, broader environmental humanities and questions of how to live in balance with the planet. Indeed, the creation of opportunities for encounters between academic and public knowledge is at the heart of efforts to create more environmentally and socially sustainable practices that reflect the expertise, experiences and interests of wider publics and to draw more diverse knowledge and needs to the attention of the academic sphere. Such collaborations have the potential to lay the foundations for transformed relationships between Global North and Global South, between Western scientific traditions and indigenous forms of knowledge, and to disrupt what de Sousa Santos calls the toxic "monocultures" of dominant forms of knowledge production.

Such partnership working has deep roots and long traditions. Far from being a product of funding bodies increasingly seeking to prove the "relevance" of research (as some would have it, seeing neoliberal influence everywhere) or the discovery of the current generation of researchers (as those participating in action research for the first time can sometimes enthusiastically imply), collaborative research draws on over a century of methodological development. Researchers working in this tradition can draw from deep wells: the practice of history from below that emerged in the 19th century, the participatory and radical arts practices that emerged in the early 20th, the radical public pedagogy of the 1960s and the Freirean tradition, the development of participatory action research as central to the emergence of a new field of development studies drawing on asset-based development and post-colonial traditions, the growth of patient-centred

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medicine, the powerful tools and voices of critical disability, as well as feminist and critical race theory.

These different traditions bring with them different questions—some are concerned with the correction of the historic record, others with the practices of collaborative and collective knowledge building, others with the imagination of alternative futures, others with creating a more accurate insight into the world. These questions shape the methodological choices that ensue—for some, it matters who turns up and who participates, for others, not at all. These traditions offer highly diverse methods, from detailed ethnographic collaborations to mass participatory activities. All of them, however, form a joyous, tangled, powerful new foundation for the creation of knowledge that offers an important corrective to knowledge made only from the experiences of the academy. Such work can surely enrich and complement disciplinary-led inquiry, providing new angles and challenging ideas, particularly as we seek new ways to define and create sustainable futures.

The articles in this collection show some of the range and all the complexity of attempts to build collaborative research partnerships; some of them with a declared transformation to sustainability ambition. The essays show what it takes to begin to build these partnerships, the time they take, the emotional and intellectual labour, the necessary corrections to preconceptions and the importance of learning to listen. They describe how the projects play out—the emergence of new agendas, the negotiation of power relationships, the tensions between funding regimes and the complicated lived experiences of the research team, the personal relationships that such research encourages that go beyond the bounds of the project. In so doing, this collection offers us a rich set of insights into what it means to build collaborative research, its difficulties and its huge potential. Its nuanced and reflective accounts of collaborations in the Marginalised North and Global South will help to deepen and enrich this century-old tradition of collaborative research that is now increasingly directed towards the envisioning and achievement of sustainable alternative worlds.

INTRODUCTION: LEARNING TO LEARN FROM THE COMPLEX INTERACTIONS AND DILEMMAS OF FIELD RESEARCH

TATIANA SOKOLOVA[1],
GLORIA L. GALLARDO FERNÁNDEZ[2]
AND FRED SAUNDERS[3]

This collection of essays has two related sources of inspiration. The first is the interdisciplinary PhD and research seminars on sustainability that have been conducted at the Centre for Environment and Development Studies Research Forum (CEFO) at Uppsala University since 2002. PhD candidates, senior researchers and master's students from all over the world with diverse disciplinary backgrounds have participated in these seminars over the years. The second source of inspiration was a workshop organised at the centre with Keri Facer, Professor of Social and Educational Futures (University of Bristol, UK), titled "Co-production of Knowledge", which took place in September 2016.

An outcome of CEFO seminar culture was the importance of ethical reflections around our responsibilities, roles and rights as researchers carrying out field research. Research presentations at universities, including the CEFO seminars, usually centre on "academic outcomes", leaving little time to reflect on the research process itself, the encounter with the "other"[4], our own queries about how the "other" sees us and the focus and aims of our studies. The increasing emphasis given to academic

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[4] Also referred to as "informant", "respondent", "the researched", "(co-)participant", "study subject", "study object", among others; the choice of these terms is not often discussed, although it is a significant element of our epistemologies.

metrics as the key measure of academic performance means that there are few proper forums and opportunities to discuss and to reflect on the ethical dilemmas we encounter in the field, as well as those that arise when presenting research to our peers in conferences or seminars. Research presentations about the South (and arguably to a lesser extent, the North) often contain rich expositions of pictures of the "other", reifying the people we study. The relevance of ethical issues in research became increasingly apparent, which led us to pay attention to them beyond casual reflection. More questions were constantly added to our discussions, especially as we shared a strong ethos for participatory approaches and sustainability. What would the research agenda of our "research subjects" be if they were given the opportunity to decide themselves? Would it be similar to our research? What does action research towards sustainability really imply? One concrete initiative coming from these co-reflections was the setting up of field research with the specific purpose of co-exploring the presentation of former researchers to the "other" and at the same time enquiring what our research subjects would like us to research (especially in relation to their livelihoods). Over time, this project grew, and the dynamics between the CEFO seminar and the workshop with Keri Facer sparked this anthology, which is an interdisciplinary and inter-university project between PhD candidates and researchers. The workshop gave us the possibility to delve deeper into the material presented in this anthology, into concepts and trends that have been gaining momentum within sustainability research, such as co-production, co-design, actionable science, collaborative research, transdisciplinarity and transformations.

One common element of all the essays presented here is that they are **ex-post critical reflections on the authors' own research** with a focus on the research process. We are sure that these post-field reflections will resonate with those versed with the research challenges of employing qualitative methodologies and related fieldwork. We hope that the reflexivity that we deal with here will help researchers to develop their capacity for self-awareness and self-understanding of encounters with the "other", where knowledge, feelings, and values are exchanged in the field and forged into (re)formulations of research questions and analytical lenses used to interpret findings (Attia & Edge 2017). We also see that the diverse material discussed in the chapters provides a source of systematised lessons useful to consider for future research.

The encounter with the "other" in the field includes first of all those whose reality researchers set out to research, but also "stakeholders", gatekeepers, as well as the peer researchers we work with: the "significant others" (Mead 1934) socialised as researchers within other disciplines.

Seeing ourselves as researchers through the eyes of the "other" can help to make the power dynamics of the research process more visible by illuminating the ontologies, assumptions, standpoints and limitations of the research as such, and of the researchers themselves. Along with Attia and Edge (2017), we argue that a concern with delving, musing and interrogating one's research approach and experience opens the possibility of nurturing "the on-going, whole-person development of the researcher, in the conviction that this entails an enrichment of the research itself" (p. 34).

Another key element of the book is that these essays describe **the experiences in the "field"**. In Burgess' simple definition, a field is a "circumscribed [area] of study which [has] been the subject of social research" (2006, p. 1). However, the simplicity ends here, because, according to Burgess, a defining component of social research is "a relationship between the researcher and those who are researched" (p. 2), which makes the whole enterprise complex. Burgess writes (2006, p. 5): "field research cannot be neatly fitted into a linear model of steps or stages, for the field researcher has to cope with a variety of social situations, perspectives and problems. Doing field research is, therefore, not merely the use of a set of uniform techniques but depends on a complex interaction between the research problem, the researcher and those who are researched"; so, it is with our authors. They have all gone there, some with neat theories, others with clear research design and methods and come back slightly bewildered with stories and accounts that inevitably challenge our preconceptions and yearnings for coherent narratives, or the research design itself; they, however, seldom have a forum to explore this fully. The "others" are the ones who, time and time again, have turned the mirror of research back on us, making us question: Who are the owners of the knowledge we create? Is not all knowledge in one basic sense always co-produced since the "other" is the source of the knowledge we (jointly) strive to truthfully, understand, record, present, interpret, communicate and put into action?

Thus, **the question of knowledge "creation" or "co-creation"** within a framework of collaborative research is present, explicitly or implicitly, is a third key element throughout this book. Co-creation as a term has been used in relation to knowledge by authors across a wide-range of different fields (Antonacopoulou 2009; Regeer and Bunders 2009). Mauser et al. (2013) call for a paradigm of sustainability research which not only integrates various academic disciplines, but is conducted in partnership with society, and defines co-creation of knowledge as co-design, co-production and co-dissemination of research by academia and stakeholders jointly. We see collaborative research as the co-creation of meanings with the "other", a

process by which the researcher's knowledge is refined/redefined in the meeting with a situated "other" and whose knowledge in the interaction with the researcher may also be refined/redefined, giving place, if the collaboration is fruitful, to a common co-created synthesis of knowledge valued by both. Collaborative research is otherwise defined as research done in collaboration between academics and communities, the aim of which is to "facilitate a productive synthesis between on-the-ground experience and theory, between reflection and action, between the existing research literature and public knowledge" (Facer & Enright 2016, p. 38). However, such ideas of collaboration are not only difficult to realise in practice but might even be problematic if power asymmetries (Herrero et al. 2018) are not acknowledged and somehow balanced; especially when the normative orientations and aspirations among those involved differ, be it among stakeholders and/or between researchers and stakeholders. This is even more so if the aim is to adopt a transdisciplinary approach[5] within a transformation-oriented research agenda towards sustainability. Sustainability science "requires an inquiry into sustainability values" as sustainability is fundamentally an "ethical concept, raising questions regarding the value of nature, responsibilities to future generations and social justice" (Herrero et al. 2018: 6).

Some of the authors in this collection have sought to conduct this type of sustainability research by co-designing strategies for action with specific communities, strategies that seek to alleviate existing sustainability-related problems (Saunders and Gallardo). Others have invited the study subjects to make contributions to current (Tunón et al.) or future research agendas (Jokinen et al.; Saunders and Gallardo), with varying results. Yet, the contributions have been able to raise and reflect upon much the same issues as Facer & Enright 2016) highlight, such as "fundamental questions about [the authors'] expertise and their identities as […] researchers" (p. 58), the uneven "nature of the reciprocity" between the "researcher" and the "researched" (p. 59), the danger of a tokenistic relationship between the two parties seeking symbolic power, when the researchers pursue "authenticity" and communities pursue "credibility" of their message in order to have an impact on policy makers (p. 60).

And, last but not least, the fourth key element present in all the works is that the authors reflect, in one way or another, on the delicate line

[5] We adopt here the following definition: "transdisciplinarity aims at contributing to societal transformations by producing hybrid scientific and socially relevant knowledge, which is rigorous from an academic perspective, relevant to challenging social problems and produces social learning though knowledge co-production with societal actors" (Herrero et al. 2018:1–2).

between **scientific objectivity and becoming an "agent of change"**, which was an issue especially for those authors whose projects responded to funded calls for actionable science. The authors have agonised over questions such as: does research give us the right to intrude into people's lives without there being a likelihood of it *really making a difference*? What gives us the right to ask them questions about a distant future or about research that might never receive funding? Understandings of what actionable knowledge is, and whether the role of researchers is limited to co-generation of knowledge for change or actually plays an active role in bringing about that change ("taking the action"), vary among the contributors. In the more traditional sense, actionable research is about the generation of scientific knowledge which "has the potential to inform decisions (in government, business, and the household), to improve the design or implementation of public policies, or to influence public or private sector strategies, planning and behaviours […]" (Palmer 2012, p. 6). Other authors (Beier et al. 2017; Kirchhoff et al. 2013) provide a similar view. They see actionable science or actionable knowledge as that which can be "acted upon", which has a high value to the potential users; most point out that such knowledge can only be co-produced with the stakeholders. We, however, would like to explore actionable research in a stronger sense, as going from understanding to action. Such an approach, with characteristics of postmodernism, will probably face resistance from those among us who adhere to the classical Weberian ideas of value-free science and objectivity.

The book comprises reflections from fieldwork undertaken in the Global North and the Global South. The "fields" range from reindeer-herding communities in Sweden to indigenous communities in South America, from dairy farms in Sweden and Norway to a nature reserve in Mozambique. Almost all the authors transcend their disciplines, either by working in interdisciplinary (Gallardo et al.) or transdisciplinary teams (Greco et al.), by combining theoretical and methodological tools of various disciplines (Ekblom & Notelid), by engaging non-academic "creators of knowledge" (Tunón et al.), or through a combination of the above. The many voices in this conversation create an intricate, complex discussion, laden with interwoven concerns, expectations, frustrations, fears, challenges and hopes. Any attempt to summarise this conversation will be a great simplification; however, a few issues have come up repeatedly: (1) the role of researcher as oscillating between being seen as an "expert" and remaining true to an approach of humility in research practice; (2) the highly competitive academic environment with its institutionalised "publish or perish" culture and related research funding

arrangements which make it difficult to invest sufficient time into building rapport and trusting relationships with the communities researched; (3) the ethics of setting the research agenda and operating in situations with ontological rifts; (4) being torn between wanting to do "actionable science" (in other words, to help your research subjects and be an advocate for their concerns and solutions) and an expectation (imposed by many academic disciplines) to be "objective" or "impartial"; and (5) the uncertainty about the ongoing effects of one's research on the communities in which it is carried out. Whether the research is carried out in the Global North or the Global South, these issues are common to all field research experiences.

Ekblom & Notelid analyse the resource management practices in Limpopo National Park in Mozambique, finding it time-consuming to build trust with the local actors—a process which is not supported by the short-term structure of project-based research funding, but necessary for a "good conversation". The authors are concerned about the role of a researcher and being "co-opted" into the local political and social struggles. Ekblom & Notelid explicitly aim to co-produce and co-design local environmental history, departing from the tradition of objectivism and anonymisation of informants in archaeology. The "collaboration" in this project seems to take the form of knowledge exchange valuable for both the researchers and the community, but the change and modification of original research ideas and design *in situ* can also be seen as an adaptive response to the realities on the ground. The role of a researcher as a neutral observer appears to the authors as an "elusive ideal".

Although the study "field" of agricultural industry in Sweden and Norway appears to be, at first glance, vastly different from Ekblom & Notelid's Limpopo National Park, some of the challenges faced by Tunón et al. are strikingly similar. Tunón et al. also reflect on the perceptions of the researchers' multiple roles: a guest, a friend, an expert, a project participant, a representative of the State—and ponder on the issues, or illusions, of "distance" and "impartiality". They also stress the importance of building trust between the researcher and the "informants", despite the high investment of time involved. Their central question concerns the ethical aspects of close proximity between the "researcher" and the "researched", and how this proximity affects the research results. This essay offers a high level of introspection and awareness of the way the participatory and actionable aspects of research interact. The reflection concerns, among other issues, power distribution between researcher and community, potential inadvertent acts of coercion and the creation of expectations that cannot be met. The authors highlight such pitfalls of co-

production of knowledge as potential conflict over ownership and dissemination of research results and findings which are unfavourable to the research participants.

Lembke et al. focus on trust and objectivity in their essay on research "on" and "with" indigenous peoples in Bolivia, Ecuador and Guatemala, and how this intersection plays out in cultural, structural, historical and epistemological contexts. The authors explore a dialectical relationship between "situational and relational subjectivity" and academic objectivity (but never neutrality). They differentiate between "fieldwork" as research and "work in the field" as activism. Echoing Ekblom & Notelid, they signify the two often conflated roles of a researcher, a conflict which they resolve in favour of the position of the scholar. In their opinion the most advantageous research position describes struggles in a compelling yet objective manner. They suggest that ethnographers inevitably influence the lives of the people they interact with and may need to explicitly take positions in their political and social research milieus. However, the authors caution that researchers need to be wary that such demonstrations of affinity do not jeopardise their ability to interact with other actors to create a comprehensive account of the local reality.

Jokinen et al. aim to deviate from the norm of researchers defining the research agenda, when they set out to present and validate past research results with fisher communities in Chile. Their ambition is "decolonisation of research", which for them means "exploring and strengthening the community's self-determination within and between local and global economic projects". The presentation of past research results went smoothly and was validated by the fishers; however, when the authors invited the fishers to co-create an agenda for future research (a legitimate intention for their "decolonisation" project, one would think), they largely failed to make this invitation understood. This is principally because the fishers perceived social science as social work, conflating the role of a researcher with that of a social worker. No matter how hard the researchers tried to direct the attention to research, the fishers talk about their current individual social problems and practical problems related to fisheries. The authors felt disconnected from the fishers, and their interaction with them was deemed by the researchers to be "a demoralising failure". Jokinen et al. ended up questioning the ethics of taking fishers' time to define something that appeared to be irrelevant and too removed from their everyday life to have any meaning. It goes to show that the intention of co-production of knowledge is not enough; prior to research, conversations conducive to levelling the ground to diminish the cultural gap may be required by introducing those we study into the norms of the

research roles, research financing structures and organisation, and how funds are used, etc. This highlights the necessity of brokering mutual awareness and expectations of the research process among all the actors involved or affected. The authors adapted to the situation by asking open-ended questions about the community's more general concerns, which led to new, more mutually productive conversations and discoveries.

Saunders & Gallardo, in a similar fashion, were not able to advance a meaningful conversation about ideal sustainable fisheries' futures with the communities in Chile and Poland, as fishers were immersed in the current problems faced by their community, unable, together with the researchers, to envision long-term aspirations for sustainable fisheries. Like Jokinen et al., Saunders & Gallardo wonder if it is ethical to ask people to look into the future when they struggle to overcome the problems of the present, and as a result they too changed their research agenda *in situ* and discarded the approach of trying to envision an ideal distant future with their research communities. Rather, they adopted a pragmatic "forward-casting" approach more concerned with addressing fisher problems in the here and now. Saunders & Gallardo's project had creation of actionable research as a condition of its funding; however, the researchers found neither the system of funding cycles, nor the mode of operation in academia with its focus on metrics, conducive to effective transdisciplinary research. The authors question where the boundaries of "actionable" are. Does "actionable" imply political mobilisation or policy reform? Does the partnership stop at the co-generation of knowledge stage or does it imply that researchers participate in enacting the knowledge for change? If so, in what role and through what means? In a similar fashion, they ponder over the meaning and the boundaries of co-production of knowledge, and whether it can be considered as such if the purpose of research and its theoretical approaches are developed within academia. Saunders & Gallardo also discovered that actionable science can be problematic not only because the researchers cannot anticipate the practical results that research may induce, but also because such results can lead to unintended negative consequences. They saw this as a heavy ethical issue/responsibility that has not been adequately addressed in academic discussions on transformations to sustainability.

Greco et al. explicitly focus on co-production of what they call "scientific and traditional knowledge" in the context of environmental and social issues in the *"barrios populares"* of Buenos Aires. They aim to produce actionable knowledge and through their reflection seek ways to improve similar interventions in the future (Sagor 2000). They reflect on how the process of co-production is experienced by the project intervention

team. Also, how their relationship with local residents was affected by inadequate prior knowledge of the situation and the short-sightedness of the local government—which the community felt the authors were associated with. Their ambition is to show what can be achieved by departing from the usual top-down intervention project approach which centres on the superficial aspects of the cultural reality in focus. The authors show that adopting a bottom-up approach allowed people from an area associated with all imaginable "social illnesses" to develop new ways of thinking of themselves, not as passive receivers of knowledge and policies, but as active creators of relevant and practical knowledge: action. Important to achieving this was the emergence of a sense of belonging that gave rise to an "us"; diminishing the distinction between the action researchers (the authors) and the researched.

Gallardo et al. (2018) studied reindeer herding in the Swedish Subarctic with the aim of using research approaches with different ontological assumptions to investigate socio-environmental processes. Reflecting on this field experience, they describe how they navigated "contingencies" in the field, from pre-arranged meetings being abruptly cancelled or postponed, to uncertainty about who has the right to represent the community, to the emergence of a deep ontological divide among researchers. They reflect on how the challenges they experienced changed the course of research and influenced their research process and understanding of the issues. The authors do not explicitly attempt to co-create research knowledge, however, they are concerned about the ownership of the research agenda and conclude that even though they tried to keep the agenda open to the reindeer herders' representatives, it was still the researchers who set and controlled it. Acknowledging this as a big challenge within participatory approaches and sustainability research (Herrero et al. 2018), Gallardo et al. made remedial attempts to have an ongoing dialogue with their informants, post-fieldwork, as well as giving the reindeer herders an opportunity to publicly comment on the research findings. Gallardo et al. believe that actionable science is impossible without innovative epistemologies for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and without an ongoing conversation between the researchers and the communities. This is an issue that again points to the unfavourable conditions imposed by the existing competitive academic practices and funding structures.

This relational ontology suggests that we as researchers and the researched co-emerge through our mutual entanglement in the research knowledge generation process. In a way, for researchers, this is an inevitable outcome of examining the reality of our "informants" while

making a concerted effort to see it through their eyes, rather than through our own (Blumer 1966). Sooner or later, this kind of mental exercise applied to research practice equips us to take a step outside ourselves and truly see and be receptive to the perspectives of "others" who are differently positioned (Keevers and Treleaven, 2011: 507). Empathy with others is inherent in symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934) and provides multiple vantage points to consider prohibitive barriers to transformative action. When we adopt a reflective approach, we enter into a dialectical relationship with those we meet in the field. We try to see reality as they see it, and in reflecting on the research process inevitably end up seeing ourselves in a new light, which helps us evolve our consciousness as researchers. Arguably, this process may lead to a more heightened ability to understand the reality of others. In this relationship, we cannot help but see the knowledge which emerges as co-created, because the very lens through which we see is affected by our ability to see others, and their ability to see us. We co-create not only the knowledge, but ourselves as the knowledge creators. And although it is perfectly possible for this knowledge to remain purely theoretical, "fundamental", or "pure" as it is sometimes called, it often is not. Whether it serves those whose reality we research, or whether it serves us, is another question, but the more we engage in co-creation and self-reflection, the harder it becomes to state that the results of our research (be it new theories, policy implications, political action or mere documentation) are objective and apolitical.

Through the essays presented in this anthology, we are creating a space to discuss and to reflect on the various dilemmas researchers encounter in the field. We present our challenges, be they methodological, epistemological or ethical, and we show whether and how we have tried (and often failed) to address them. To this extent, we hope that the collection will be of interest to fellow researchers in social sciences, humanities or natural sciences, whose research involves going into the field and encountering real people, with real voices, problems, opinions and interests.

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1

OBJECTIVITIES AND TRUST IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH *ON* AND *WITH* LATIN AMERICAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

MAGNUS LEMBKE[1], RICKARD LALANDER[2] AND J. FERNANDO GALINDO[3]

Highlights

- Ethnographers need to walk a tightrope between objectivity and inevitable subjectivity
- Researchers and actors co-create objectivities through the negotiation of subjectivities
- Academic practice and societal action are complexly intertwined during work in the field

Abstract

This chapter deals with an inevitable form of subjectivity in field-oriented research on and with ethnically defined peoples in Latin America. It asks whether ethnographers can enter a research field marked by historical injustices and highly asymmetric power struggles without losing the standpoint of value-free outsiders. We argue that scholars in the field are not disconnected from local cultural and institutional settings, they cannot expect to conduct fieldwork without a substantial degree of subjectivity. Theoretically, a distinction is made between fieldwork and work in the

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field, emphasising the often-dual position of researchers: as scholars and activists. We argue that an activist stance is sometimes necessary, though stressing that the primary position must always be that of the scholar—particularly in those highly conflictive fields which often characterise the societal periphery of the Global South. Ethnographers are not merely spectators. Interpretations and conclusions will be affected by the passions and ideological positions encountered in the field. Moreover, ethnographers frequently enter the field with worldviews determined beforehand, a predisposition that may generate misunderstandings, exaggerations or even prejudice. Methodologically, the text draws on decades of fieldwork on indigenous peoples´ struggles and conflicts in Bolivia, Ecuador and Guatemala. The text problematises the intricate intersection between objectivity and research, on the one side, and trust and subjectivity, on the other. The authors conclude by stressing the importance of upholding an "objectivity" that does not clash with the basic premises of a communal narrative rooted in historical experiences and structural perceptions of the world. Situational and relational subjectivity is thus inevitable, but that does not imply that the ambition of academic objectivity must be sacrificed. Such objectivity should not be conflated with "neutrality", lexically speaking.

Introduction

> Subjectivity and objectivity thus join in a dialectical unity producing knowledge in solidarity with action, and vice versa. (Freire 2005 [1970], 38)

This text problematises the idea that ethnographers should enter the local field of research while maintaining their position as value-free outsiders. At the centre of our concerns is whether, and to what extent, an ethnographically oriented researcher should uphold the ambition to produce objective and critical analysis when entering a field marked by historical injustices and highly asymmetric power struggles. More precisely, we ask how to deal with an *inevitable subjectivity*, when conducting field-oriented research on the indigenous peoples of Latin America.

On the one hand, scholars in the field are not disconnected from local cultural and institutional settings. Researchers cannot expect to conduct interviews and participatory observations without a substantial degree of subjectivity. Just as ethnographers, wittingly or unwittingly, will interfere in, and affect, the daily life of people they interact with, this encounter will also have an influence on research design, assumptions and approaches.

Accordingly, the selection of data, as well as interpretations and conclusions, will be affected by the passions and ideological positions encountered in the field. Ethnographers are not merely spectators, not just flies on the wall. On the other hand, the research design will unavoidably be accompanied by certain subjectivisation and most likely the ethnographer will also—in a broader ontological sense—enter the field with pre-determined worldviews, that is, with baggage that may generate misunderstandings, errors, exaggerations or even prejudice. Although researchers may sympathise with the struggle of the principal actors of their research, they are confronting ontological and epistemological worldviews which may not be completely intelligible for them.

Both dimensions—the transformative effect of the field *and* the predispositions of the researcher—affect the prospects for scientific objectivity. We depart from the notion that objectivity is rooted in specific understandings of how the world functions and in varying definitions of knowledge. Consequently, given the fact that we deal with encounters between distinct ontological and epistemological traditions, we prefer to speak of objectivities in the plural. However, we do not wish to fall into some form of postmodernist relativism and its inherent hostility towards objectivity claims (Hegelund 2005, 647). We are convinced that a critical approach and objectivity must remain a central scholarly ambition, though simultaneously acknowledging that ethnographic research will be marked by a high degree of inevitable subjectivity. We prefer to speak of this orientation as an "ambition", knowing that ethnographers cannot completely detach themselves from the milieu. Thus, any attempt to uphold some form of strict scientific objectivity must possibly be refuted right at the entry into the research field. To some extent, ethnographers must take sides, and even actively demonstrate their position in relation to local struggles and narratives. If they sympathise with the local indigenous group, but fail to demonstrate it, the prospect of achieving local trust will be constrained, which in turn will affect their chances to collect necessary data about the group.

Furthermore, while declarations of partisanship might help the ethnographer to establish bonds of trust, active support—such as participation in various forms of protest activities and public media declarations in favour of the indigenous group—might jeopardise the prospect of carrying out interviews with other key actors in the conflict in question, which may be of great concern considering the fact that an ambition to uphold objectivity often rests on the assessment that all parties to the conflict must be heard. This is a sensitive balancing act, albeit scholars are often equipped with efficient channels and useful tools to

transgress the frontiers of the local conflict. At stake is thus how to navigate towards objectivity, critical analysis and balanced accounts in contexts that demand subjectivity, activism, and mutual trust. Of course, the level of activism taken on by the scholar hinges on the nature of the study at hand, more precisely whether its purpose is to analyse activism *sui generis*—in which case ethnographic activism may constitute a viable position—or, whether the aim rather concerns the comprehension of the conflict in all its dimensions—in which case activism may result in the reduction of possibly competing interpretations.

Before developing the argument further, we should clarify that ethnographers evidently do not always—or automatically—side with "the indigenous" actors just because they are "indigenous". There is a lot of romanticising within this specific research field, much of which stems from tenacious historical myths of the "noble native" (e.g. Ellingson, 2001) and so forth, myths which may even be encouraged by representatives of the indigenous peoples for the sake of strategic essentialism. Indigenous peoples are not homogeneous groups. In our view, such a generalisation is an element of romantic mystification. The ethnographer should instead critically consider the broad variety of socio-economic, cultural, economic, religious, political and academic differences among the ethnically defined peoples. Each local setting may present new analytical challenges. This caveat notwithstanding, one must acknowledge the tendency among ethnographers to side with the indigenous peoples, particularly in cases when the latter are engaged in conflicts within strong power hierarchies and political/social oppression, in this text referred to as inevitable subjectivity.

This text thus aims at problematising how to manage the intricate terrains in the intersection of objectivity and research, on the one side, and trust and subjectivity on the other. Methodologically, it is based on personal field experiences by the authors when conducting research on rural and peri-urban indigenous populations in Bolivia, Ecuador and Guatemala (e.g. Lembke 2006; Lalander 2010; Galindo and Albó 2011).[4] When discussing and comparing these experiences, we were assisted by a

[4] Evidently, the indigenous peoples have, to a large extent, for decades experienced processes of urbanisation, modernisation, secularisation and integration with the non-indigenous population. These processes have at times altered their traditional livelihoods. Moreover, the boundaries between the rural and urban societies have changed. All these factors place them in a constant tension between continuity and change. Notwithstanding, the principal identity marker among most indigenous peoples is that of belonging to a specific community, even for those that have, for years, been living in, or working in, urban settings.

theoretical framework based on a distinction between *fieldwork* and *work in the field* (e.g. Albó and Ruiz 2017; Galindo 2018).

We are aware of the fact that we are joining a discussion that is traditionally occupied by anthropologists, that is, scholars who place issues related to objectivity and subjectivity at the forefront of their academic concerns. However, as an increasing number of scientific disciplines embrace ethnographic methodology, a broadening of the debates is warranted, beyond the confines of anthropology. The authors of this study stem from a Latin Americanist tradition of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary political sociology, albeit highly inspired by anthropological research. In the following section we discuss our underlying theoretical frame. Thereafter, two analytical sections problematise our central research inquiries and provide illustrative examples from our own fieldwork, and some strategies for how to deal with practical ethnographic challenges. Finally, a few brief pertinent concluding remarks are presented.

Objectivities and trust in ethnographic work in the field

In research contexts marked by contentious human relationships, the distinction between *fieldwork* and *work in the field* should be emphasised. The first refers to the ethnographic tradition of "objectively" collecting information for purely academic purposes (e.g. writing a thesis). The second position, *work in the field*, takes issue with this tradition by stressing the need to gather research data in interaction with the concerned group in order to contribute to their consciousness-raising and agency-forming processes. Thus, by focusing on socio-political empowerment, *work in the field* is an approach in which academic procedure and societal action are intimately and complexly intertwined. Translated into our area of expertise, one may speak in terms of a boundary separating researchers who are working *on* indigenous peoples (*fieldwork*) and those who—like Paulo Freire's dialogical educator—are working *with* the Indigenous peoples (*work in the field*).

In practice, though, the balance between action and objectively oriented research is not easily achieved. In a previous research project on interculturality and sustainable rural development in Bolivia, Galindo and Xavier Albó detected three distinct meanings of objectivity at the intersection between action and research. Similar to the notion of *fieldwork*, the first position downplays action (i.e. the political agenda and social needs of the actors) while crediting research. In this sense, the situational construction is made by the researcher and legitimised in terms

of objectivity. The second position views research as subordinated, that is, academic activities function as opportunities for actors to advance their social and political agendas. Objectivity thus becomes the subjective expression and positioning of the actors involved. The third position—akin to *work in the field*—favours a dynamic interaction between action and research. The academic work then functions to explicitly bridge the "living theories" of people, voiced by the actors themselves in collaboration with researchers. In this case, objectivity is co-constructed based on mutual trust and negotiation of the subjectivities of both the researcher and the actors (Galindo and Albó 2011; Albó and Galindo, 2012).

While basically sympathising with the *work in the field* approach and the third position mentioned above, we argue that the relationship between research and more politically motivated activism must be further problematised. In our view, the role as supportive activist should never completely outbalance our mission as critically oriented scholars; the latter should prevail, particularly so if the study aims at understanding all sides of the conflict. This way of problematising scholars and activists brings us to the relationship between scientific objectivity and the prospect of gaining confidence from the local actors. As argued in the introduction, trust is a central ingredient in ethnographic work. A common assertion among ethnographers is that objectivity in the strict academic sense of the word is an untenable position with and vis-à-vis local actors. Particularly in contexts of immense polarisation and where hostility between stakeholders is based on mutually exclusive metaphysical worldviews or staunch ideological positions—as for example in cases of ethnic conflicts or land occupations.

Jorge M. Valadez refers to these situations as "incommensurable cognitive and moral differences" which "undermine the possibility of finding a common ground for resolving intercultural disagreements" (Valadez 2001, 58). Entering such contexts, ethnographers may reason that they are in a situation in which all ambitions of academic objectivity must be sacrificed. They may argue that in environments of "either you are with us, or against us", they are forced to take sides. Although their ambition is to interview all actors in the conflict, they may feel pressured to limit the scope of their investigation, arguing that a half-told story is better than no story at all. This, of course, may be a minor problem for scholars *working in the field,* who right at the onset of their project have shown manifested an active support for the less powerful part of the conflict.

Accordingly, as researchers we may experience that approaching the field requires us to openly and wholeheartedly sympathise with one of the

camps. Whether we want to or not, we may reason that we must turn ourselves into actors, into players in the local socio-political game. For most ethnographers this is probably more of an academic than a moral problem. Ethnographers operating within the ample field of subaltern studies frequently share the perspectives of the interviewees, including a common understanding of the root causes of subordination and oppression. This moral and ideological convergence was probably what determined the entry of the researcher into the field to begin with and may even have affected the research question itself. To some extent, subjectivity will enter the research process, somehow also impacting on the results. This is what we have referred to as an *inevitable subjectivity*.

The subjective/normative postures and decisions typical in qualitative social research will thus accompany the ethnographers from the very start, when initiating a project, and in all subsequent stages of the research process. First, in the definition of the research problem, we normally depart from settings of social injustices, frequently along ethno-cultural and socio-economic divides. Secondly, when entering the field, the selection of empirical data is affected by the efforts by the ethnographer to achieve local trust, a stage that will be further problematised in due course. Thirdly, we must deal with the challenge of relative objectivity and inevitable subjectivity in the publications and reports of the project, that is, when our prime focus moves from the local group to the academic community. Fourthly, the subjectivity-objectivity dichotomy also reappears in the stage of presenting the final research product to local actors who may, perhaps, find it to be far away from their expectations. This stage is too often ignored or trivialised by many scholars.

But, is the belief that the ethnographer should always sympathise openly and wholeheartedly with the local struggle really based on a correct assessment? Do local actors want us to work *on* them or *with* them? Do they prefer us to occupy the role as scholars or activists? To what degree is our academic work circumscribed by the fact that we have entered contexts marked by incommensurable cognitive and moral differences? Our argument—which will be further developed below—is that an objective assessment of local struggles may be a preference shared by scholars and local actors alike, albeit their underlying arguments may differ. Whereas the researcher associates objectivity with universal scientific norms, the researched population may, perhaps, consider our objective position as useful for them in their struggle. Again, in the multiple encounters of the fieldwork, it is preferable to deal with objectivities in plural. In short, the ethnographer's quandary is that he/she addresses two types of audiences from which recognition is wanted.

As previously noted, common sense tells us that this dual recognition is based on requirements, according to which the research community demands compliance with academic norms and the local group asks for political support, in some cases perhaps even forms of militancy. In our view, this notion is overly simplified. Rather, the ethnographer needs to scrutinise how the significance and implications of various "objectivities" differ between her/his target groups. Why would community members not appreciate the value of scientific objectivity and critical analysis? As the great ethnohistorian Marc Becker and others have pointed out, indigenous peoples have skilfully and strategically internalised exogenous factors (e.g. Clark and Becker 2007; Valdivia 2005). Indigenous societies are not "closed corporate communities" (Wolf 1957). Liberalism, communism, conservatism, etc., have all been recycled into suitable ideological tools in the overarching de-colonial struggles for autonomy, land and inclusive participation (e.g. Albó and Galindo 2012; Lalander and Lembke 2018). Why would indigenous peoples not be able to use Western academicism in the same way? Thus, in terms of the requirements stemming from the two target groups, our conviction is that there is more of a convergence than is normally assumed. Objectivity is a relative, political, situational and plural phenomenon. In other words, one should not conflate "objectivity", or "objectivities", with some form of strict "neutrality". We need to further problematise and—to some degree—blur the subjectivity-objectivity distinction.

Scholars, activists and activist-scholars

Most ethnographic studies on indigenous peoples struggling for social, economic, political and/or cultural rights against an overwhelming power, will probably be affected by, what we have termed, inevitable subjectivity. However, some scholars go further, moving from ideological and ethical persuasion to various forms of direct action. Put differently, they move from *fieldwork* to *work in the field*. This passage may not only rest on commitment and an identification with the interviewees but also on a sense of academic practical necessity. As their argument may run, fruitful ethnography depends on high levels of trust between researchers and the central actors of the locality, which in turn convinces the scholar of the need to go from mere sympathy to action. But, is scholarly activism really necessary for winning the hearts and minds of the local population?

Evidently, for communities engaged in asymmetric conflicts with e.g. landlords, transnational companies, coyote middlemen, or cooptative state functionaries, all forms of external support (moral, symbolic, economic or

political) are probably desired. However, as an ethnographer one needs to ponder whether the interviewees, in their search for such support, primarily want support from scholars or activists. There is a tendency, we argue, that scholars in the field too easily equate trust-gaining with activism, while associating their academic role to another arena and another audience—that is, to a distant socio-institutional environment which they know will only in extraordinary cases contribute to a positive outcome for the weaker party in the asymmetric struggle.

Take, for example, the initial and often delicate question of whether and in what ways the research project in question will benefit the local population. In responding to this interrogation, while simultaneously being aware of an often-desperate local need for instant external support, the researcher may try to somewhat avoid references to time-consuming academic processes, uncertain publications in unknown academic journals, a presumably narrow readership and a blurry argument on the value to the community of being academically visualised. It may be more tempting to turn to an argument on the political significance of his/her engagement as activist. Needless to say, however, to gain trust, honesty is paramount.

At this point, it is worth underlining that there are at least two forms of honesty in play when entering the field. The first one has been discussed by sociologist Alberto Melucci, and concerns an honesty directed towards the overall research project. He argues that the initial gathering of field information has two principal purposes: to gather information around the movement/organisation of the research project, and to choose a sample that may be representative of the movement/organisation. The challenge is to find an honest and, at the same time, functional connection with the first goal without losing the second, while remaining faithful to the objectives of the research (Melucci 1991, 247–248). The other form of honesty is more relevant for our discussion. It concerns the relationship between the ethnographer and the interviewees. In the final instance, it concerns trust.

Legitimising presence in the field by convincing the local population of the political significance of the research project is not necessarily an attempt to deceive them. Many scholars in the field are often simultaneously involved in activities of more immediate utility for the local community, such as defending their cause in non-academic media, participating in various forms of direct action, using their academic status to pressure local and national authorities, and/or participating in local consciousness-raising activities.

Nonetheless, it is important to consider the possibility that in a choice between activist or scholarly support, the local population may desire the latter. Undoubtedly, activist performances by ethnographers are in most

cases appreciated, but community members may still prefer that the former fulfil their obligation as scholars, that is, local actors may expect the ethnographers to uphold scientific "objectivity" and a critical approach, particularly if assuming that the preservation of such academic "objectivity" will speak to their advantage. While appreciating the support of the activist, the local population may prefer a scholar to tell their story, that is, opting for a spokesperson equipped with the legitimacy of the academic profession, who may open arenas hitherto closed to them.

In this light, a possible risk for scholars leaning too much toward the activist dimension of their dual activist-scholar positioning is to be considered by surrounding society as an integral part of the conflict, that is, by demonstrating a partisanship that will jeopardise their academic trustworthiness. In contrast, if leaning primarily towards the position as scholars they may be allowed a certain leeway, particularly if the ethnographers come from abroad. Foreign academics might at times lack important local insights, but may, in compensation, have a greater freedom of transgression due to a looser insertion into local power structures and legal-institutional settings as well as a more critical approach towards nationally dominant cultural discourses. To a certain extent, foreign scholars may avoid the "either you are with us or against us" trap and move with less friction across the demarcation lines of the conflict. Again, by emphasising the academic side of the activist-scholar duality, we may possess more alternatives to conduct ourselves in ways not possible for those who publicly demonstrate a more radical form of partisanship. This flexibility, we argue, is mutually beneficial for researchers and community members alike.

Rather than being classified as an act of disloyalty, our ability to move across the frontiers of the conflict—being able to enter socio-political arenas generally closed to activists—may be interpreted by the local community as something valuable. However, it is important to remember that this appreciation is based on a situation in which community members are convinced that the scholar shares their basic worldviews. They must nourish the expectation that the scholar, in his/her ambition to honour academic norms and procedures, still belongs to their camp. If that conviction prevails, they may probably argue that an all-sided coverage of the conflict will strengthen their own case.

The question, however, is how to act academically within a milieu of highly asymmetric power relations, where all attempts at dialogue between stakeholders seem to have failed. Even more difficult is how to comport oneself in situations where both parts of the conflict are present and when the ambition of the scholar is to produce an all-inclusive description. How