



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

ISSN 2385-2755
DiSSE Working papers
[online]

WORKING PAPERS SERIES
DIPARTIMENTO DI
SCIENZE SOCIALI ED ECONOMICHE

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in Indigenous Context**

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N. 9/2024

SAPIENZA - UNIVERSITY OF ROME

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CF80209930587 – P.IVA 02133771002

Decolonizing Research Methodologies in Indigenous Context

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Abstract: During the last decades the indigenous dimension increasingly entered the sociological debate especially in the post-colonial and decolonial studies and within the scientific literature about environment and conservation practices. However, how the knowledge of indigenous people have been collected is a crucial methodological problem, because indigenous communities have long experienced oppression by Western researchers (Datta 2018) who saw them as research curiosities and/or a problematic population to be controlled (Cunneen, Rowe, Tauri 2017).

This paper aims to explore the literature that has problematized the ways in which social science researchers think about methodologies and approaches in indigenous contexts (Smith 1999), highlighting how research has often reproduced eurocentric extractivist dynamics, through the formal rules of scientific paradigms (Santos 2008).

The epistemological and methodological challenges consist in proposing a decolonial perspective in the field of methodology in indigenous¹ contexts, through collaborative ways of research in community, “restoring participants voice in a show of respect, reciprocity and responsibility” (Datta 2018, p.21). In this perspective a transformation is required in the way in which the researchers enter in the community, who should build a trusting relationship through which enhancing the knowledge of community members, in order to realize a research that can benefit both the academy and the community.

Key words: Methodology, Decolonial research, Indigenous peoples, Western research, Colonialism

Introduction

This article critically discusses the approach of academic research in indigenous contexts, that has often reproduced dynamics of objectification of indigenous communities or appropriation of their knowledge. The term Indigenous People - as Smith points out - “is a relatively recent term which emerged in the 1970s out of the struggles primarily of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood (...) it is a term

¹ The expression indigenous people comes from the anglo-saxon language and refers to the regions inhabited by indigenous peoples. However, it would be more appropriate to use the expression "povos originarios" from Brazilian Portuguese (for which there is no equivalent in English), which indicates the fact that these peoples are the original inhabitants of the areas historically invaded by settlers.

that internationalizes the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world's colonized peoples (...) and as Wilmer has put it, indigenous peoples represent the unfinished business of decolonization" (Smith, 1999, p.7). Indeed, Western modernity has created a dominant scientific and north-centric knowledge that is generally recognized as valid, and outside of this there are usually little credible alternatives. Epistemic decolonization must be accompanied by an appropriate methodology capable of building a dialogue that is culturally appropriate, respectful, conscientious of the indigenous community. In this article I considered some examples of decolonised research that have as a common approach the active participation of the indigenous community.

1. The consequences of colonialism in the epistemic dimension

The need to think about decolonised research stems from the observation by many scholars (Quijano 1992, Smith 1999, Chalmers 2017, Santos 2018, Meneses 2020), according to which colonialism (and previously imperialism) has brought to contemporary Western society a way of doing research that reproduces the same oppression that occurred during historical colonialism. Through imperialism, the new European states expanded their borders and economies, creating a new geopolitical order in many areas overseas.

Subsequently, colonial society also created an image of what the future nation would be like: the Europeans living in the colonies were not culturally homogenous, so there were struggles within the colonising community; wealth and class status created very powerful settler interests (...) All this process took place in a context where the indigenous communities were often dispossessed of their lands and usually forced to work for the colonists (Smith 1999).

In the analysis of Frantz Fanon, "imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonised peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting the world" (reported by Smith 1999, p.35). The effects of colonialism were and are several: colonization has transformed the land, the way in which knowledge is produced (imposing often knowledge that has nothing to do with the land or the people), the ways to operate business and more in general the way to define the humanity (Chalmers 2017).

In this context, colonialism has had and continues to have a strong impact on the epistemic dimension since modern science, proclaiming itself as the only valid knowledge, offers an understanding of the world that hides the diversity of the peoples of the colonies and denies the validity of their knowledge, constructing an argument based on dichotomies such as nature/culture, traditional/modern, savage/civilized, north/south (Santos 2004). Viveiros de Castro and Ames (2021) offers a reflection on how researchers of classical anthropology, have adopted that definition of culture created by the English scholar Tylor in his work *Primitive Culture*, in which culture is "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871, p.1). Culture thus, becomes an object of study by researchers, analyzed through academic tools and methodologies, "with the aim of classifying the native forms of knowledge

present in the world”(Viveiros de Castro 2021, p.47).

Although it is objective that global epistemic experiences are innumerable, North-centered modernity has managed to create an intellectual hierarchy between North and South Epistemologies, where the North is not meant in a geographical sense, but includes those places where a model of thinking typical of the Western rationality is applied. The marginalisation experienced by other forms of knowledge belonging to other cultures seems to be “the result of a geopolitical project created by colonialism itself which continues to reproduce the contexts of the North Atlantic as the epicenter of the relationship between being and knowing, the only space that generates a universal reference legitimate” (Meneses 2020, p. 1084, my translation).

Western rationality has developed a neat separation that has its origin in Cartesian dualism between mind and body (*res cogitans/res extensa*), which has led to the exclusion of the body from the realm of spirit and consequently its objectification (Quijano 2000, Chalmers 2017, Santos 2018). Knowledge is produced mainly through the scientific process of observation, hypothesis, test, analysis and conclusion. Anything that doesn't follow this procedure is not scientific, and if it's not scientific, then it's not valid. In this way, the academy has marginalized indigenous knowledge, which is generally recognized as an inferior social experience, and, as Freire observed, “the academy has also underestimated the sociological experiences built up by indigenous and traditional communities, evidence of an elitist ideological valorisation that leads to scientific, ideological, and epistemological error” (Da Silva, Pereira, Amorim 2023, p.2, my translation).

Recognizing and legitimizing what comes from the indigenous world as a source of knowledge, even if it uses different patterns compared to Western analytical thought, is a necessary process for researchers to develop decolonized research. Through this expression, we mean a kind of research in which there is no hegemonic or more legitimate form of knowledge than others, where researchers establish a horizontal dialogue based on recognition and mutual respect between themselves and those who interact with the research activity.

Undoubtedly, the production of decolonised research is not only the task of the individual researcher, but also of the academic system behind him/her, within which students are educated. This is perhaps the most difficult challenge to overcome, since even today our politicians, media and newspapers, our school systems still speak of the “discovery” of America (and other colonised countries in general), as well as of the first, second and third world, of developed and underdeveloped countries, and continue to denigrate everything that is not classified as scientific, thus perpetuating the series of dichotomies described above.

2. The inferiorization of indigenous knowledge

Indigenous researcher Smith stated that a core component of the colonial project was the devaluation and the constant attempt to remove indigenous culture and knowledge (Smith 1999). Dominant Western academic practices actively marginalized their

epistemologies treating indigenous people as the object of research (Chalmers 2017), or as an inconvenient population because they live in areas of the earth rich in raw materials (Cunneen, Rowe, Tauri 2017).

Research activities have included a wide range of colonial practices that lead to the exploitation of local knowledge or the appropriation of indigenous cultures, highlighting that research is often not an innocent or distant academic exercise, but it responds to certain logics, interests and guidelines that often don't leave any positive impact on the indigenous community that hosts the researcher (Smith 1999, Datta 2018). Moreover it has been argued that in the indigenous context, people have been treated mainly as objects of research, through a process that Césaire called "thingification", in which indigenous people have been classified as a new discovery or a research curiosity, alongside species of exotic plants and animals. In order to repair this great epistemic rift, which has created a partial representation of reality that has only been seen, analyzed and validated by the Western scientific eye, it is necessary first to recognise this dynamic just described and then to understand what it means to decolonise.

Historical decolonisation is the process by which states that had been colonised by European countries achieved independence between the late 1940s and the early 1970s. Scholar Rivera Cusicanqui, analyzing socio-economical process in South America during between the decades 60-70, pointed out that the theory of production had also influenced the social sciences, bringing out the colonial character of post-independence societies. These societies have been characterised by paternalistic and colonialist practices in the face of the ethnic question, in which the greatest effort on the part of governments was to integrate and civilise indigenous people. On the epistemological level, the consequence has been to produce "an asymmetrical relationship between the subject who knows (the Western intellectual) and the ethnic other, whose identity is attributed by an outside eye" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1987, p.4). If the decolonisation that occurred in this short period of time was strictly political, economic and institutional, the liberation process that leads to a decolonial way of thinking walks on different tracks. To adopt a decolonial view of society means to have developed an awareness not only of the historical fact of colonialism, but especially of how this historical fact has changed the way one perceives oneself as an individual in society in the present, in relation to what was imposed by the coloniser in the past.

Inferiorisation also becomes cultural, more subtle and difficult to identify. Decolonising therefore means recognising the epistemic plurality that exists among the peoples of the Earth and "imagine the world of knowledge more like an archipelago, and to read reality not as a cartographic projection but as a kaleidoscope that allows you to see things differently and to build new images of new realities" (Borghi 2020 p.266).

In the indigenous context, it has been claimed that to "decolonise" means to understand as fully as possible the forms colonialism takes in our own times, and thus the purpose of decolonisation is to create space for an Indigenous perspective in everyday life, research, academia, and society without it being neglected, shunted aside, mocked, or dismissed (Kovach 2009, p.89). Decolonisation can be seen as a multidimensional process that requires many different people with many different practices working together to transform power dynamics. According to Meneses, it includes also an "evaluation and amplification of the knowledge that successfully resisted the capitalist-colonial intervention (...)

where the struggle for decolonisation is one of the foundational elements of the twentieth century; it includes the analysis of struggles, commitments, agreements and results, the rethinking of the fundamental aspects of who has power and who challenges it” (Meneses 2020, p. 1090, my translation). In the opinion of Santos “the starting point is the recognition of mutual ignorance and its endpoint is the shared production of knowledge; to achieve this kind of production of knowledge, a methodological «craftsmanship» is needed – the ability to adapt research questions to the context, the search for specific methods of debate for each field – as well as a cultural translation to create cognitive experience shared by the different groups” (reported by Pellegrino, Ricotta 2020, p.821).

Decolonization has been seen as a process of becoming, unlearning and relearning (Smith 1999),

that can change not just the way research is constructed but also the researcher him/herself: decolonizing researchers need to break down the barriers between researcher and subject (participants) and deal with emerging ethical issues (Denzin and Norman, 2007). To make this possible, it is not necessary to reject all Western methods and theories, but rather to integrate the possible methodologies and adopt the one that best suits the context, creating a methodology that can be a bridge able to connect different epistemic dimensions in the most appropriate way.

In this process, it is essential to adopt a decolonial mindset, as Fanon foresaw: “the veritable creation of a new man (...) the “thing” that has been colonised becomes man in the same process by which it liberates himself” (Fanon 1963, p.36-37). Researchers will have to develop an awareness of reality that allows them to see colonialism as a complex and still current phenomenon, and to accomplish a transformation of intellectual thought, establishing a dialogue between different forms of knowledge and thus a radical reconceptualisation of the way research is carried out (Chalmers 2017, Thambinathan, Kinsella 2021).

3. Decolonizing research and the academy

Throughout history, indigenous people have endured a lack of recognition for their knowledge, which is normally rooted in a deep comprehension of their land, available resources, the wisdom passed down by their elders, and a cosmogony that serves as a guide for how to live in harmony with the ecosystem, and encompasses the means of providing sustenance, medicine, and everything that is necessary to organize the life in community (Roht-Arriaza N., 1996). The significance of this knowledge has often been marginalized in contrast to the dominant scientific perspective, leaving indigenous communities more exposed and more vulnerable. The way of seeing indigenous peoples as merely objects for research is a perspective that still has not disappeared. Consequently, researchers may feel empowered to freely extract information and interpret the data in ways that align most conveniently with the expected results. This attitude, of conducting research and producing progress, reflects a characteristic posture of Western rationality, which constantly needs to collect new information about what is categorized as "other". Unfortunately, this approach often fails to critically question whether this way of creating knowledge is ethical or respectful regarding the alternative

knowledge system that is the subject of study. In general, “the global hunt for new knowledge, new materials, new courses (...) supported new threats to indigenous communities”(Smith,1999, p.25).

In my opinion, resolving the challenges of how to establish decolonized research, demands a profound rethinking of what constitutes proper research, appropriate methodologies, and ethical conduct. This perspective can prompt us to reflect on the fact that research is typically authored by an individual or a team of researchers. However, the decolonial approach aims to open up the production of knowledge through a co-created activity between indigenous communities and scholars.

As Smith noted, "when indigenous people become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, and people participate on different terms" (Smith, 1999, p. 60). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the writer to faithfully represent the context being examined, and it may be argued that, as much as a researcher may be aware of appropriate methodologies, the integration of the voices and lived experiences of those who are part of the research, can return a more authentic and genuine result. For instance, in the context of indigenous communities, the conception of reality is often intertwined with a spiritual realm, where people and the environment are regarded as interconnected entities. They live in accordance with a complex and detailed cosmogony that comprehensively describes all aspects of life, from the origin of the world to the constitution of the physical body. In this framework, sources of valued knowledge are “dreams, the ancestors, stories and experience which are embedded in relationships to the social and physical environment” (Cunneen, Rowe, Tauri 2017, p.73). Therefore, to defend the diversity of knowledge it is essential to think of research as an integrated activity, emphasizing collaboration between all its participants, aiming to conduct research “with” them rather than “on” them. This is consistent with the perspective of Louis, “if research does not benefit the community by extending the quality of life for those in the community, it should not be done (...) indigenous knowledge needs to be protected (for example, through the recognition of Indigenous intellectual property rights), and research outcomes shared” (reported by Cunneen, Rowe, Tauri 2017, p.73).

When we talk about indigenous knowledge, however, we are talking about knowledge passed down from generation to generation, often orally, over a period of time that normally coincides with the birth of the group, thus something truly ancestral and ancient. Indigenous peoples adopt a knowledge system that is very close to that described in Bruno Latour's Gaia hypothesis, whereby all organisms on Earth are interconnected and there would exist no separation between them. It is not surprising, for example, that the word ‘territory’ does not exist in the indigenous languages of the Amazon of the Alto Rio Negro, because for the inhabitants of this area, territory means “continuous land with autonomy and sovereignty, where they live with different customs, history and philosophy (...) autonomy and sovereignty refers to a system of self-government, where the decisional power and the plans for the future are in the hands of the indigenous nation” (Ferreira de Faria I., 2015, p.99, my translation). To comprehend this rich and complex form of information, researchers must adopt a stance of active and empathetic listening. Additionally, to gain a profound understanding, humility is required, excluding any notion or assumption of superiority of one knowledge system over the other, in this case, the

presumed greater validity of the Western Science over the Epistemic South. Hence, it is necessary not only to rethink how research is performed but also to embrace a transformative praxis, a concept that Paulo Freire systematized in three areas: “theory, values, and practice. Theory requires engagement with questions that the community one works with seeks to explore; values entail determining what the community values, and the value of the research to the community; while practice refers to the capabilities, and services researchers may offer particular communities” (reported by Thambinathan, Kinsella 2021, p.6).

In this regard, the study and methodology proposed by Fernandez-Llamarez and Cabeza is a prime example of decolonial research. These scholars recognised indigenous storytelling as a means to support local participation in conservation initiatives, revitalizing biocultural heritage. For them, through indigenous narratives, there is focused attention on indigenous ontologies that show how nature has an intrinsic value, a space inhabited not just by other living beings, but also by spiritual entities. Collecting and preserving these indigenous narratives has a positive effect, it enriches and sustains both local culture because it is enhanced and kept alive through the conversations, passing it on to younger generations, and it holds significance at a political level, by understanding how indigenous worldviews can improve conservation communication. This, in turn, can assist conservation practitioners in making decisions according to local culture and community perspectives (Fernandez-Llamarez, Cabeza, 2017).

Datta introduced a decolonized form of research that would promote collaborative engagement

with the participant community. This method involves utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR) during which the writer was “a collectivity composed by the researcher, elders, knowledge-holders and youth (...) the collective writer identified as ‘we’ determined the meaning and the way to conduct the research, deciding together the research title and question, sharing the ownership of data analysis, making collective presentations, and publishing collectively” (Datta, 2018, p.16- 17). In a separate study, an analysis was conducted on research projects developed with Art-Based Methods (ABM), revealing the good impact of ABM: “engagement of participants in interesting and culturally relevant activities; relationships of mutual trust, respect, and power; creation of new (forms of) knowledge; the build of individual or community capacities (...) Thus the research in this case is the result of collaborative investigation through creative writing or visual art. Most of the time the art forms employed were visual, with photo and images (...) photovoice was the most frequently used, video production, including studies engaging in such practices as documentary film-making and digital storytelling” (Hammond, Rabaa, Gifford, Thomas, 2018, p.268). More specifically on the Amazon territory, researchers Faria and Farias de Aquino provide insight into the employment of the participatory cartogram research method used to understand the transformations within the indigenous territory of the Alto Rio Negro. This method involves acquiring knowledge from the local indigenous communities. Through a participatory mapping approach, maps of the region (both hand-drawn and computer-generated) were created with the help of GPS technology and direct on-site observation, showing the geographical locations of communities in the Amazon rainforest, along with the significant elements that are considered important to the inhabitants of the area (such as mountains, waterfalls, islets, cemeteries). The creation

of these maps was, therefore, achieved through "group works and interviews with the participation of the elders of the communities, indigenous leaders and alumni, and then with the elaboration of the cartograms(...) through meetings in which the participant's knowledge about land, sustainability and culture was heard, reinforcing their identity, and above all giving them the opportunity to assert themselves as authors of their history"(Ferreira de Faria I., 2015, p.100, my translation). Still the Project New Social Cartography of Amazon is an excellent practice of participatory research where all participants (normally the inhabitants of the area being described) are invited to contribute to the description and creation of the map. The result is a map that will show what is considered important for the community, any conflicts in an area will also emerge, creating a "description in motion" quite far from the idea of a strictly geographical map (Wagner, 2013, p.159).

It becomes evident that all of these methods are the result of a constantly evolving methodology, where the active involvement of indigenous people with the researchers in a collaborative way and the reciprocal nature of this relationship are the central point. This co-creation process is fundamental to the production of decolonial research.

Conclusion

Historically, the first news of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon came from the Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci, who in 1499 was in the service of the Crown of Castile. On his second voyage to the American coasts, he arrived at the mouths of the Amazon and the Pará rivers stating in one of his letters that "probably these two rivers are the cause of the fresh water in thesea (...). For four days with twenty well-armed men we put into the river and sailed by dint of oars for two days going upstream about eighteen leagues, sighting many lands. Thus sailing up the river, we saw very certain signs that the interior of those lands were inhabited". From then on, the Amazon and the rest of the lands we call America, would be the site of raids to satisfy the scientific curiosity and search for raw materials, of the Spanish and Portuguese Crown. One of the legacies of colonialism to academia was the creation of an intellectual hierarchy. This hierarchy positioned the Epistemology of the North, which holds scientifically approved knowledge and therefore considered more valuable, in contrast to the Epistemology of the South, where other forms of knowledge are often regarded as inferior, less valuable, and therefore marginalized. This dynamic emerged, very clearly, in the interaction between Western academia and indigenous peoples. From the outset, indigenous communities were often treated as objects of research, viewed more as exotic curiosities than as a reality with which to humbly confront and be able to learn and build an exchange. In my perspective, decolonizing research is an intellectual duty of researchers, and of the academic and educational apparatus they are part of. In recent decades, the sociological debate has become more and more enriched, focusing on how to decolonize research in the indigenous context. It has recognized that certain research practices as mainly extractivist of information, knowledge and data, without contributing to the community or creating a reciprocal relationship with it. While such an approach may have met the criteria of university research in creating new scientific articles with fresh information, it

certainly did not meet the equally important standards of ethics. Along these lines, decolonizing research does not mean rejecting Western methodology, but rather transforming it in such a way that it adopts a participatory methodology, in which research is the result of co-writing or co-production work, where authorship can be collective, thus producing a kind of work that reinforces the identity of participants.

The relationship of respect and reciprocity between the researcher and the people/communities gives rise to activities that guarantee the participation of all the actors in the process, in an articulated and comprehensive way. As Virtanen stated: "Respect and care also extend to the ancestors, to those generations that are now considered present in the form of birds, animals and in different places. They teach in non-human ways, as well as through dreams, received songs and visions. Respect for other humans therefore includes previous generations" (Virtanen, 2021, p.229).

Not least, a kind of research that includes the indigenous perspective would also be very enriching, precisely because of the diversity of their cosmogonies. These cosmogonies, as a common element, feature a holistic worldview of life in which all living beings are interconnected with each other, with the surrounding environment, with spiritual entities, with the earth, and with the sky, extending up to the cosmos.

Hence, I firmly believe that adopting a decolonial stance presents an invaluable opportunity for academia. It is an opportunity that must not be overlooked if we aim to continue fostering research that creates authentic and genuine knowledge. In this context, it also serves in fulfilling a restorative mission at the epistemic level with indigenous communities, who have historically been excluded from the realms of what is conventionally considered scientific knowledge.

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