

Sticky Methods, Social Frictions and Advocacy: The Researcher Inside Social Movements

by Brandon C. Whitney, MEdSc 2007

*The notions of right and wrong can be invoked
not only in relation to the truth, but also with
regard to the cause of social justice*

Kirsch 2002: 193

Introduction

As a social science researcher, working with political and social movements focused on human rights and/or environmental justice often means that one is intimately engaged with the very organizations fighting for marginalized populations. This situation presents a world of moral and methodological challenges for the researcher, and raises serious questions about the role (or possibility) of objective scientific engagement with social movements. I argue that the researcher must plan for and engage these challenges and opportunities before the research begins, but must also prepare to be reflexive-in-action as challenges continually arise. This article will discuss some themes that emerged during the process of doing my research, rather than share products of my research. That is, I am going to talk about my methods rather than my data.

Brandon Whitney graduated from North Carolina State University with dual degrees in Biology and Political Science. His past experience in conservation and community development based in natural and social science and the humanities, has helped him understand and appreciate interdisciplinary approaches. He has been involved in diverse projects such as large-scale landscape ecology of corridors and edge effects, small-scale community development and NGO-building, rural environmental education, GIS-based conservation mapping of rare ecosystems and urban community-based forestry in public parks.

Doing science within social movements

To gain a more nuanced perspective on a social movement—that is, something more than an observer from the outside—the researcher often has to be positioned inside a movement. Organizations and institutions that work with marginalized people, against the odds of political and power structures, and sometimes under the threat of danger or harm, are often not keen to open their doors to academic scrutiny. Researchers, therefore, have to “prove themselves” as an unthreatening presence; often this means presenting themselves as an ally or advocate. Sometimes this is an honest position, sometimes it may not be. I take up the case of the well-intentioned advocate who is also trying to do rigorous research, and I will use my own work as an example.

My research examines a US-Ecuadorian NGO (non-governmental organization), with offices in San Francisco and Quito, working with several indigenous groups in the south-central Amazon of Ecuador on organizational strengthening, political advocacy and territorial management.¹ What started as the “accompaniment” of a single indigenous nation by a group of metropolitan donors and advocates in the US and a professional team of Ecuadorians based in that nation’s capital, has grown into a complex set of partnerships between a US-based funding and advocacy alliance, an Ecuadorian non-profit organization and seven Amazonian indigenous nationalities. Through a variety of methods—primarily multi-sited institutional ethnography, participant observation and detailed interviews—my research seeks to understand the nature of these NGO-

Photograph 1. NGO staff working with indigenous political leaders in the field.

Photo B. Whitney



indigenous partnerships across spatial scales and, particularly, the role of discourse about indigenous peoples and conservation in such transnational relationships. I explore how such discourse is connected to new understandings of power, identity, agency, representation and interdependence in the Ecuadorian indigenous context.

I will return to my own work soon, but I want to connect my thinking to some helpful ideas from scholars who have engaged these ideas of research and advocacy within social movements. I have borrowed terms in this article's title from recent thinking by two individuals. "Stickiness" is a term that geographer Paul Robbins uses to describes the mysterious quality in a researcher that forces her to attempt to be ethical and scientific, engaged and removed, and advocate and critic, all at the same time (Robbins 2004). Robbins claims that such stickiness "causes livelihoods, advocacy, and research to cling together" and thus presents "a puzzle for appropriate and progressive work" (Robbins 2004: 201). "Friction" is a word employed by anthropologist Anna Tsing to characterize the capacity for creative productivity that comes out of collaborations between

groups that are socially or culturally different (Tsing 2005). Of such collaborations, Tsing writes, "they are also the stuff of emergent politics: they make new objects and new agents possible" (Tsing 2005: 247).

A researcher in the context of a social movement has the tendency to wear multiple hats, to feel pulled in different directions, to be conflicted by personal and professional roles. It is this "stickiness," which affects researchers' methods and actions in the context of social "frictions" inside social movements, which I want to explore. Social science methods, particularly ethnography, allow for much subjectivity on the part of the researcher, but usually attempt to follow the convention that ethnographers should try to be as unobtrusive in the lives of their subjects as possible (Jorgenson 1989; Emerson et al. 1995; Stewart 1998; Bernard 2002). However, the stickiness of her methods and the friction of her involvement may lead a researcher inside a social movement to question such conventions. Becoming more involved in the movement she studies may allow the researcher to generate unique data by "exploit[ing] the tensions between participation and observation," but it may also allow her

to alter the movement itself (Harrington 2002: 56). In my understanding of social science advocacy, I focus on the latter possibility. For simplicity, I will consider the two extreme orientations toward involvement: choosing to focus entirely on one's research and to focus entirely on the social movement.

The researcher as "Scientist"

Taking the position of the scientist means that one places her faith in the nature of her research and its ability to contribute to bettering the position of marginalized populations vis-à-vis the movement. In other words, she is choosing to value her research above the movement, its struggles and participants—at least in the short term. This stance may be based on the premise that the researcher can continue to be a disengaged observer of reality rather than a participant in that reality. The researcher might take this stance because, ultimately, she feels that more good will come of exposing, criticizing or reforming some element or practice of a particular organization through research, than could come from her involvement in the social processes she is observing.

In one example from my own research, I found myself observing a staff meeting about planning, monitoring and evaluating the NGO's work with their indigenous partners. Numerous projects for the coming year were being discussed, including the potential addition of new work areas such as cultural preservation projects. It occurred to me that it would perhaps be better for some or, ideally, all of the indigenous nationalities to be present during this discussion of their own future involvement. Had I decided to wear my scientist hat in this moment, I might have chosen not to say anything. This observation—their failure to include indigenous voices—would provide valuable insight for my research. While I might have felt conflicted personally, the choice to make a suggestion would have colored my interactions

with the organization for the rest of my fieldwork. Moreover, it would affect my objectivity as a scientist.

The researcher as "Advocate"

Taking the position of an advocate (at least as I have characterized such a role) would mean that one sees herself as a participant in the social movement, as an ally—expert or otherwise—on behalf of those marginalized populations with whom she is working. In other words, she is choosing to value the movement, its struggles and participants above her own research. Such a stance might be based on the premise that a researcher cannot be a part of an organization or institution without affecting some degree of change, and that she has a responsibility to be conscious of such change, both in terms of its impacts and its value for her research. A researcher might choose this position because, ultimately, she feels that more good will come of her conscious and careful involvement in the social processes of which she is a part than from her research results. Such a self-aware researcher may understand that more conscious political engagement with the social movement might alter the character of her data, but decide to turn the question on its head. Rather than "How is my involvement going to affect my data?" she might ask, "How will my lack of involvement affect the marginal populations I work with?"

In my own example of the staff meeting, were I wearing the advocate hat, I would have chosen to say something about the lack of indigenous participation in the planning efforts. Not saying anything would have been to shirk my ability and responsibility to help make small changes that I believed would benefit the participants of the social movement. While I might have felt conflicted professionally, the choice not to say anything—however valid from a research perspective—would have been to ignore the best interests of the indigenous

people and their struggles. I would have been choosing my own interests as a researcher over those individuals I am ultimately working to benefit.

Searching for middle ground: the advocate researcher

Clearly, the previous discussion is a bit polarized; researchers inside social movements obviously will not always be able to see things as such diametrically opposed choices. We are always at once both a bit scientists and somewhat advocates. But, how do we choose the best possible combination? The “middle ground,” a term used by scholars of indigenous movements in the Amazon, means much more than simply reaching some intermediary point between two extreme or conflicting views. Rather, the point is that we find “a mutually comprehensible world characterized by new systems of meaning and exchange” ([White 1991] cited in Conklin and Graham 1995: 695). There is no foreseeable position in which a researcher could anticipate every instance in which her authority as a researcher or allegiance as an advocate will be challenged. We must then—all of us involved in this sort of work—move toward more constructive and open forms of engagement so that we can push the envelope of both research and advocacy far beyond an either/or scenario.

Ideally, we would work in a milieu between academic institutions and their civic counterparts engaged in social movements to create new middle ground for research, learning and just, effective practice. The very notion of a “mutually comprehensible world” of research and advocacy suggests that the researcher cannot create such a space alone; it is a negotiated space, and the organization must also be involved in recasting the role of the researcher. Such an arrangement, however, will take much time and energy. However, I do not mean to claim that there is an onus on researchers to

create this space based on their instincts—clearly their methodological training should better prepare them for such situations. But, methodological considerations such as these are not well fleshed out in the social sciences. As one anthropologist writes: “That the community under study influences the direction of ethnographic research has become axiomatic in the era of reflexive anthropology, although the politics of cooperation and collaboration have yet to receive similar or sufficient attention” (Kirsch 2002: 183). Training for new social scientists ought to continue pushing the boundaries of their fields.

In the meantime, individual researchers can (and, I argue, should) take it upon themselves to begin seeking a middle ground between research and advocacy. Indeed, by recognizing our own limits and impacts, and by scrutinizing our own interactions with our multiple institutions, we become agents in the creation of our own middle ground. To the extent that we can anticipate better collaboration with the social organizations we do our research with, we should also approach our collaborations as a space to innovate mutual understandings. Furthermore, in the spirit of advancing the boundaries of research within our disciplines, we should make these methodological characteristics of our engagement clear in our writing and in the dissemination of our findings.

In the case of my own research, consider again the situation in the staff meeting I described above. What should I have done? The point I want to make is that there is not necessarily a single correct answer. What did I do? I decided to try and wear both hats at once by letting the process conclude as it had, hearing out the rest of the conversation and watching the meeting come to an end. Later, I approached the director of the NGO and gave her my suggestion, explaining that I was speaking both as an individual who cared deeply about our shared cause—supporting the strug-

gles of the indigenous peoples—and as a social scientist who was trained to be a critical observer. The director was very receptive to my suggestion. Throughout the remainder of my research, I had other opportunities to express to the staff my views on their monitoring and evaluation process, and began giving my opinions openly during meetings. Through these and other conversations, I continued to negotiate—more and more openly each time—my role as both a scientist and an advocate. It is my honest judgment that, while certainly not a perfect situation, I got better research results and was a more constructive presence for the organization through my efforts.

We may, in our individual circumstances and with our own understandings of what is possible, become “advocate researchers”—we can each move toward more reflexive social science research. I do not argue for a certain methodology or approach, because I believe in the emergence of new ideas during the process of confronting the diversity of challenges that researchers will undoubtedly encounter in this kind of work. Rather, I wish to encourage other students to seriously consider the questions I have raised before they embark on their research and think proactively about how to answer them—not only once in the field, but also during the conceptualization, planning and writing phases of their projects.

Endnotes

- 1 Following common practice in ethnography, I choose to protect the organization and its staff by not revealing names.

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