

# 4

## Empowering Methodologies: Feminist and Indigenous Approaches

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### Chapter Overview

This chapter explores empowering methodologies through an examination of feminist and indigenous research approaches. First, we consider what might be involved in employing empowering methodologies and suggest that such methodologies have deep roots in feminist research practice, which is discussed in section two. Through time, features of feminist research practice have been incorporated into many other research approaches. In section three we examine one of these approaches—that of indigenous geographies—and outline some of the specific empowerment strategies currently being employed by indigenous researchers. Having briefly outlined some of the potentials and challenges of feminist and indigenous approaches for qualitative researchers, in section four we outline some key issues to consider when using empowering methodologies. The chapter finishes with a brief conclusion in section five.

### Introduction

In this chapter we are concerned with the empowering and transformative potential and mechanisms of qualitative research. We consider first what is meant by *empowering research*. Such research is not simply about studying “something”; through its objectives and day-to-day research practices, empowering research holds significant transformative potential for those involved. Thus, according to Raju (2005, 194), **empowerment** is “a process of undoing internalized oppression” and, in the case of women’s empowerment, “it is also about changing

social and cultural forms of patriarchy that remain the sites of women's domination and oppression." Women are recognized as proactive agents who can exercise power to alter the process of empowerment and participate in social change. However, for Louis (2007, 131), empowering research with indigenous communities must "be conducted respectfully, from an indigenous point of view" and should have "meaning that contributes to the community. If research does not benefit the community by extending the quality of life for those in the community then it should not be done."

At its simplest, empowerment therefore refers to the process of increasing the social, political, spiritual, economic, and/or psychological potential of individuals and communities. It often concerns groups that have been marginalized from hegemonic decision-making processes through discrimination based on historically constructed unequal relations of power (on the basis of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, nation, dis/ability). The process of empowerment aims to undo or overcome oppression and increase opportunities, knowledge, skills, collective action, and choices for those groups routinely pushed to the margins of society. It can also disrupt further attempts to deny improvement to their opportunities. Empowering research aims to support these groups to (re)shape organizations, policies, institutions, and everyday encounters affecting their lives. It can also challenge normative assumptions and negative stereotypes about these groups to promote greater justice or equity. Such research can be instigated and developed by marginalized groups, or through collaboration with researchers as "allies" who have access to useful resources, knowledge, and skills (see Chapter 17). In sum, according to Scheyvens (2009, 464) "empowerment means activation of the confidence and capabilities of previously disadvantaged or disenfranchised individuals or groups so that they can exert greater control over their lives, mobilize resources to meet their needs, and work to achieve social justice."

However, doing empowering research is not easy. Research that aims to transform the people it is working with, or to challenge hegemonic power relations and promote social justice, cannot be simply and quickly achieved. It can involve hard work, frustrations, contradictions, uncomfortable reflexivity, reinforced power relations (as well as successes, progressive change, and satisfaction). It should not be assumed, for example, that such communities wish to "be" transformed, nor that there are shared meanings about what empowerment might entail or how it

might be attained. Rather, empowerment unfolds, is resisted, and is transformed through the process of research and there are no straightforward guarantees of liberatory research (de Leeuw et al. 2012). Indeed, in a recent critical appraisal of empowerment, Ansell (2014) argues for the need to adopt a relational approach that recognises the need to transform power relations at multiple levels, while Wijnendaele (2014) suggests that emotions and embodied knowledges are crucial elements in bringing about such social transformation. An understanding of these types of complexities involved in the process of doing empowering research has been deeply influenced by feminist research practice.

## **Feminist Research Practice**

There is no single route to conducting empowering feminist research because there are many different approaches to feminist geography. As Moss and Al Hindi (2010, 1) note, there are “myriad ways of being feminist, engaging in feminist praxis and producing feminist geographies.” Moreover, feminist research practice has changed over time and has been conducted in different ways in different places. There is therefore no single “story” or totalizing account about empowerment and feminist research practice: it is diverse, sometimes contradictory, and overlaps with, draws on, and influences other bodies of geographical work, as we will discuss.

Early debates about feminist research practice concerned many questions. What makes geography research feminist? Are there any distinctly feminist methods? To what use should such methods be put? Answers circulated in a range of special journal issues and edited collections around the political goals that might be afforded through attention to the design, analysis, and dissemination of a research project and to the diverse methods that might be used to achieve these feminist aims (see *Antipode* 1995; *Canadian Geographer* 1993; Jones et al. 1997; *Professional Geographer* 1994, 1995; WGSG 1997). There was (contested) understanding that no particular research methods were distinctly feminist. Rather, it was more important to consider the “work” to which the methods were put and to choose methods appropriate for answering the research questions and addressing the aims of the research. In other words, it was the epistemological stance taken towards the methods that was important in achieving feminist goals. However, what many studies of feminist geography did have in common was their

political and intellectual goal of changing the world they sought to research, in other words, engaging in social and political change. Such transformative feminist research often initially foregrounded women and/or gender as the primary social relation (see Box 4.1). So feminist geography research involved politicizing a methodology through feminism to conduct research that was often pro-women, anti-oppression, or based on social justice (Moss 2002a, 3, 12), which challenged male dominance, made women's lives visible, and exposed gender inequalities (England 2006, 286). It was recognized that this involved the whole project, from the initial decision to undertake research on a specific topic to presenting the final outcomes.

#### **Box 4.1**

##### **Example of Research Empowering Women**

Based on the Dangme West district of Ghana, this paper explores how poverty reduction programs (PRPs) with credit components can reduce women's vulnerability to poverty and significantly improve their socio-economic status through access to financial and non-financial resources. This has, in some cases, improved gender relations at the household level, with women being recognized as earners of income and contributors to household budget. However, other women still regard their spouses as "heads" and require their consent in decisions even related to their own personal lives while for other women improved economic status has created confrontation between spouses. The paper recommends that assisting organizations must address "power relations" at the household level, otherwise socio-cultural norms and practices, underpinned by patriarchal structures, will remain "cages" for rural women.

Charlotte Wrigley-Asante. 2012. "Out of the dark but not out of the cage: women's empowerment and gender relations in the Dangme West district of Ghana." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 19(3): 344–63.

As feminist geography asserted itself (ACME 2003; Bondi et al. 2002; *Gender, Place and Culture* 2002; Moss 2002b; Moss and Al Hindi 2008), there was increasing recognition that there was no one feminist geography political project, precisely because understandings of feminism

were grounded in specific histories, cultures, places, and biographies. As feminism became reconstituted into diverse feminisms that challenged the idea of a “universal female identity” (often based on the unstated assumptions of white, heterosexual, able-bodied “Western” norms), so too came increasing awareness of the multiple oppressions affecting women’s lives, which demanded that feminist geography go beyond gender as the central construct, to recognize its intersection with lifecourse, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, place, nation, and religion (see, for example, Blanch 2013). Drawing on influences from queer, postcolonial, and ecofeminist theory and anti-racist and transgender politics, there was increased recognition of the multiplicity of social relations of difference and the myriad hierarchies of power that were involved in research with diverse social groups. This recognition of the differences between women (and men) is sometimes referred to as “third wave feminism.” It led to some demanding questions for feminist geographers through the deconstruction of the category of gender that had initially formed such an important foundation of feminist geography enquiry. Thus, Jenkins et al. (2003) asked, if gender inequality were no longer privileged, what made a feminist project distinct from other critical human geography projects? In response, Raghuram and Madge (2007, 221) suggested that diverse feminist geographers still shared a (polyvocal) interest “in challenging the varied forms and effects of gendered power differentials as they intersect with a host of other factors, such as race, class and nation, and in a commitment to dialogic, pedagogic, research and political practices.” Sharp (2005, 305) concurred that it was “not just the processes through which data is collected ...that makes it feminist, but also the way in which projects are conceptualized and how we as researchers act as people (ethically, politically, emotionally) while engaged in the process.”

As Sharp (2005) was intimating, three key themes were emerging out of constantly evolving feminist geography research practice. First, feminist geography research critiqued *ways of knowing* (epistemology) by contesting objectivity and validating subjective experience, acknowledging the situatedness and non-universality of knowledge creation and demanding awareness of the importance of context in producing what could only ever be a partial understanding of any research situation. This created new understandings of what counted as “knowledge.” But it also presented challenges to *ways of researching* (methodology, the second theme): accounts were replete with discussions of the complexity of power relations and ethical

issues involved throughout the research process, the multiple and shifting identities of all those involved, and how these influenced both the knowledge created and contested the boundaries of “the field” of research. Feminist geographers were at the forefront of discussions surrounding reflexivity, positionality, politics, and accountability. Emerging out of these debates were reflections about the ambivalent yet embodied nature of the field (Parr 2001; Sundberg 2003); the emotional entanglements involved in feminist research, in which research subjects were viewed as knowledge agents (Bondi 2003; Chako 2004); and the complexities of establishing collaborative ways of presenting findings through alternative writing strategies (Sharp et al. 2004). And thirdly, feminist geography research was also significant in stimulating debate surrounding *the politics of research*, promoting ideas about conducting research that allowed “silenced” voices to be heard; recognizing the multiplicity of viewpoints, voices, and locations that geographical investigations might entail; and retaining a sharp focus on the social and political empowering potentials of research.

These features of feminist geography research practice have been highly influential beyond feminist geography: they have formed important elements of debates and developments in qualitative research in cultural, queer, sexual, emotional, children’s, participatory, postcolonial, and indigenous geographies, for example. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, for feminist geography has always been in iterative dialogue and contestation, both changing and being changed, by other sub-disciplinary ideas, languages, and political visions. Through this process Sharp (2005) argues that although an awareness of, and sensitivity to, gender has been mainstreamed in geography, the feminist political project still operates on the discipline’s margins (Sharp 2009, 77). Despite this, many feminist research practices have become commonly accepted aspects of qualitative research (for example, consideration of reflexivity, positionality, research power relations, situated knowledges, emotions), although feminist geographers are also still at the forefront of troubling over and unsettling those very practices (see Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Chattopadhyay 2013). Thus feminist geographers have highlighted the tricky and messy nature of empowering research in practice (see Attanapola et al. 2013; Nager 2013 ).

So perhaps feminist geography research practice can best be envisaged as “rhizomic” (Moss and Al Hindi 2010), constantly changing and being changed. The political visions of feminist geography are not sedimented into simple stages of historical progression nor do

feminist research practices seeking empowerment remain unaltered. Rather, there is a situation of both continuity and change, with some tried and tested research methods and political intentions coexisting alongside newer ideas and practices. Thus today feminist geography research projects employing empowering methodologies are greatly varied. Some projects focus on empowering women (Buang and Momsen 2013); others on exposing “naturalized” gender power relations or highlighting patriarchal assumptions, practices, and male bias (Bee 2013; Zanotti 2013); others on considering boys/men, manhood, and on challenging hegemonic masculinity (Faria 2013; Lahiri-Dutt 2013). Other projects interrogate heteronormativity through a focus on sexualities routed through queer theory or transgender politics (Dominey-Howes et al. 2013; Selen 2012) while others are more concerned with sexual geographies of blackness, questioning the universalism of Western gender theories and feminist readings of gender and sexuality Bailey and Shabazz 2013; He 2013). More recent works explore how feminist politics might be “revitalized” through the dynamic networks of new media (McLean and Maalsen 2013) or through reinvigorated discussions surrounding patriarchy and everyday sexism (Valentine et al. 2014). However, as Moss (2005, 42) summarizes, what still distinguishes research as feminist is that “it deals with power in some way—whether conceived as something to be held, exerted, deployed, mobilized, sought after, or refused, or as something structural and inevitable, despotic and concentrated, or dispersed and everywhere.” Next we examine one research approach that has drawn on, and influenced, feminist research practices: that of indigenous geographies.

## **Indigenous Research**

Geography has a long history of supporting the colonial expansion of Europeans into Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. Wherever explorers ventured, the grid of the cartographer was soon to follow. Geography’s colonial history has been documented by a number of geographers since the mid-1970s. Godlewska and Smith’s (1994) *Geography and Empire* detailed the history of geography’s complicity in European colonialism and laid a foundation for geographers interested in shifting the focus, or decolonizing, contemporary research within the discipline. One part of decolonizing the discipline has been focused on examining how research is undertaken.

At the same time that geographers, and other social scientists, began to reflect on their role in constructing and perpetuating colonialism, indigenous peoples around the globe were coming together to redefine their tribal or regional conflicts with colonial and settler-state powers within a new, global anti-colonial narrative. This articulation of a global indigenism, or **indigeneity** (see Niezen 2003) has resulted in relocating indigenous-state conflicts from the national to international scale. The establishment of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2000) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) are two recent milestones within this global narrative around indigeneity.

As indigenous peoples have been articulating their struggles within international fora, they have also been rejecting their long history as the “natural” subjects of Western research. This push back by indigenous peoples has led to a significant shift in indigenous-focused research by geographers since 2000. While indigenous peoples have been the focus of research by geographers since the rise of geography as a modern discipline in the early nineteenth century (see von Humboldt 1811), much of this work has been exploitative in nature. It was research “on” and “about” indigenous peoples and geared toward controlling and dominating populations who had only recently come under the jurisdiction of European crowns.

This method of doing research “on” indigenous peoples has remained the dominant paradigm for the past two centuries and only began to shift once indigenous communities began to articulate their own research methodologies and agendas. The seminal moment of paradigm shift within the academy is marked by many as the publication of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) influential book *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Smith’s book provided an opening for dialogue not only on how research methodologies have harmed indigenous communities around the globe by aiding the EuroAmerican colonial enterprise, but also by asserting that research could and should be conducted “for” and “with,” instead of “on” and “about” indigenous communities. While it may seem like a straightforward and common-sense notion that indigenous communities should be active collaborators and participants, deciding what research is done in and on their communities and homelands, this is a relatively new idea within the academy (see Box 4.2 for an example).

#### **Box 4.2**

##### **Example of Research Empowering Indigenous Peoples**



Based on a research partnership involving the James Bay Cree community of Wemindji, northern Quebec, and academic researchers at Canadian universities, this research for a conservation project that used protected areas documents the process of applying community-based participatory research principles as a political strategy to redefine relations with governments in terms of a shared responsibility to care for land and sea. The authors describe how empowering methods, including collaborative, equitable partnerships in all phases of the research; promotion of co-learning and capacity building among all partners; emphasis on local relevance; and commitment to long-term engagement, can provide the basis for a revamped community-based conservation that supports environmental protection while strengthening local institutions and contributing to cultural survival.

Monica E. Mulrennan, Rodney Mark, and Colin H. Scott. 2012. "Revamping community-based conservation through participatory research". *The Canadian Geographer* 56(2): 243–59.

The other crucial shift Smith's (1999) work has brought to the fore is even more significant. For Smith, the logical progression of decolonized research methodologies is an inevitable assertion of **indigenous methods**—methods conceived and articulated from non-Western world views. Smith describes a set of research projects within a framework based on her experience as a Maori woman. However, Smith did not simply imply that all indigenous research need originate within a Maori perspective but instead she opened the door for different indigenous communities to articulate their own specific indigenous research methodologies. Hence, indigenous communities need no longer be constrained by the Western research paradigm that has laboured to colonize them for centuries. Today, indigenous communities frequently control not only the research agenda in their own communities, but that research can also take place using methodologies conceived within their own ontology.

Smith's ground-breaking work has opened space, albeit at the margins of the academy, for a deeper dialogue on how indigenous methodologies might be conceived and articulated. Recent books by Shawn Wilson (2008) and Margaret Kovach (2009) have begun to push these

boundaries forward for a broader indigenous studies audience. Recent journal special editions have brought this discussion within the sphere of the geographic community (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 2008; *Canadian Geographer* 2012; *Geografiska Annaler B* 2006; *Geographical Research* 2007). Although the specific articulations concerning how indigenous research methodologies should operate are as varied as the individuals and communities voicing their opinions, a few key concepts seem to have reached consensus status.

These key concepts, first identified by Harris and Wasilewski (2004) through their work with Americans for Indian Opportunity, articulate an indigeneity that cuts across the obvious differences between indigenous groups throughout the Americas and beyond. These key concepts, commonly referred to as the 4 Rs—relationship, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution—were determined to be core shared values articulated through two decades worth of meetings and discussion among diverse indigenous groups in the 1980s and 1990s. They have also been adopted by indigenous academics and are now commonly referenced as the core ethical values that should govern an indigenous research methodology. The drive to articulate indigenous research methodologies is, in part, as Louis (2007) has identified, because there is a significant difference between research done with indigenous communities using Western methodologies and using indigenous methodologies.

The first stage in any research project is the establishment of a relationship between the researcher and those with whom she or he intends to work. This is the same for those intent on working with indigenous communities, although the establishment of a relationship in this context implies a deeper sense of responsibility than might be expected in many research relationships. Russell Bishop (2005, 118) describes this establishment of an ongoing relationship as “the process of establishing an (extended family) relationship, literally by means of identifying, through culturally appropriate means, your bodily linkage, your engagement, your connectedness, and, therefore, an unspoken but implicit commitment to other people.” Building such a research relationship by creating an extended family commitment around your shared interests requires showing your face to the community. This form of relationship cannot be negotiated through emails and phone calls. Many a non-indigenous researcher has been confounded by a lack of response from indigenous communities to their research queries. For many indigenous communities, no response is a way of saying “no” without creating disharmony. This raises the fundamental question of whether a no response should be conceived

as meaning “no” to the research being proposed or whether it merely means “no, not now.” Sometimes developing a research relationship with an indigenous community or individual may require many hours sitting in an office or home, perhaps drinking tea or coffee, and talking. This dialogue is not only about establishing the research and agreeing to its parameters, but it is also about developing trust across the complex power inequalities inherent in any relationship between academics and non-academics, particularly where research has played or continues to play a role in the colonial relationship.

The myriad responsibilities one takes on in establishing such a relationship are founded within acts of reciprocity. This reciprocity, while predicated on both acts of giving and receiving, is motivated by giving: not giving as charity, but giving as honouring. As Harris and Wasilewski (2004, 493) describe, “at any given moment the exchanges going on in a relationship may be uneven. The indigenous idea of reciprocity is based on very long relational dynamics in which we are all seen as ‘kin’ to each other.” Building a research relationship, then, with an indigenous community cannot be based on a “helicopter” approach where you drop into their lives for a short stay and then disappear with the information you need, never to return. These extended familial, research relationships require lasting and durable commitments; they require not only being hosted in the community but they also require a reciprocal hosting in your own home or institution. It is a cyclical reciprocity predicated on a continual renewal and sharing (see also Chapter 17).

Redistribution inherent in sharing serves to balance or rebalance relationships. As researchers, we are disciplined to view research as our possession: knowledge we have created and own. The truth, though, is that research never takes place in a vacuum free from the influence of those we work with. Those with whom we “do” research are aiding us in creating new knowledge. Frequently, it is just a translation of knowledge already commonly held by indigenous communities to a non-indigenous audience. Sharing gifts, whether they be material wealth, information, time, talent, or knowledge, is all a part of this obligation of redistribution. Within many indigenous communities, this is referred to as a “give away” or potlatch. Central to this obligation is the ethos “to whom much is given, much is expected.” It is through this redistribution that everyone in the community is valued.

While increasingly influenced by indigenous world views in their formation, indigenous research methodologies remain in dialogue with critical, participatory, and feminist

methodologies. It is through this ongoing exchange of ideas, through geography and the social sciences more broadly, that indigenous methodologies are starting to influence the ways in which research is conceived and conducted. This transformation of geographical methodologies from colonial to postcolonial sensibilities requires vigilance and determination.

Having discussed some of the potentials and challenges feminist and indigenous research practices raise for qualitative researchers, in the next section we outline some key issues to consider in making the move towards using more empowering methodologies. This discussion is only a starting point—there are numerous other issues we have not had space to mention—and it is structured around approaching the research, doing the research, and the politics of the research, although of course these three processes are constantly interacting.

## **Using Empowering Methodologies**

### **1. Approaching the Research**

#### ***Early Beginnings: Creating a Long-Term Dialogic Relationship***

According to Raghuram and Madge (2006, 275), the initial framing of research might be in terms of why the research is being conducted in the first place, an approach that forefronts the ethical issues of who gains from the research and why. The researcher must start to think about and work through in dialogue the power relations, inequalities, and injustices that enable and allow the research to occur and must be committed to working towards challenging these at different scales—the personal, the institutional, and the global–political. This might be attempted through a process of engaged pluralism (DeLyser and Sui 2013, 10) where various “views are engaged, divergences openly tolerated, and differences dialogically embraced. Differences may not be resolved, but genuine engagement can lead to enhanced . . . creativity on all sides, stimulating new thought.” This might, for example, be undertaken through the use of “talking circles” (see Evans et al. 2009, 903), in which the opportunity to speak is distributed sequentially around the circle and confrontational style argument is discouraged.

However, from the outset, it is also important to recognize that the research project may not always be instigated by the researcher. It is imperative to “make space” to listen for and respond to the self-determination of women’s or indigenous groups who might articulate a need

for a specific research project or who might initiate the research in the first instance using their conceptual notions, research designs, political intentions, and ethical review practices, which may differ from those of the researcher. Here the researcher might become an “academic ally,” acting as a conduit between the research community and academic institutions and public funding organizations through all stages of the research process. This process of “walking with” (Sundberg 2014, 39) the research community might take the form of supporting and fostering the group’s “capabilities” to undertake research themselves and advocating for the institutional and structural changes necessary to make this possible. Thus the researcher might actively work with (or in response to) the community or group from the inception of the project, including articulating initial research questions, writing grant proposals, agreeing on shared responsibilities in the implementation of the research, discussing redistribution of the resources for carrying out the research, and considering how results might be analyzed, written, and reported to produce different types of research products that may be differentially beneficial to the various groups involved in the research. This process is likely to involve lasting and sustained relationships, commitments, and obligations. It is also involves recognition of the active political subjectivity of women’s and indigenous groups, who may have their own structures of power that shape research agendas, designs, and relations, as well as potential harmony and/or dissent within their group.

### ***Moving the Centre: Making Space for Multiple Ontologies and Polycentric Epistemologies***

A second key issue in approaching empowering research is the value of developing a research sensibility that is open and hesitant, that refuses “to allow the taken-for-granted to be granted” (Ahmed 2004, 182 quoted by Sharp 2009, 78). An example of this refusal is given by Mishuana Goeman (2013). She argues that it is vital to refocus the efforts of Native nations beyond replicating settler models of territory, jurisdiction, and race to remapping settler geographies and centring Native knowledges. This appreciation that different societies (or groups and individuals in society) might have distinct views of the world, or have diverse ways of being in the world, involves being receptive to the idea of **multiple ontologies** (Hunt 2014). Furthermore, different groups may have diverse ways of knowing, asking different types of questions about the world

and transmitting them in varied ways, signifying the need to validate **polycentric epistemologies** (Harding 2011, 154). In other words, if we can start to understand and value that there are multiple world views and many different ways of conceptualizing knowledge (although these might initially be unfamiliar and difficult to comprehend), we can start to appreciate that world is made up of manifold, heterogeneous, dynamic ways of being and knowing. This is a vision of a **pluriversal world**, in which many worlds belong (see Sundberg 2014, 34).

Thinking about the world as pluriversal involves advocating and making space for multiple knowledge systems and life worlds that are legitimated *on their own terms*. In this process, “Western” knowledge loses its central and universal position and becomes one of a range of competing and contested knowledge systems. This suggests that Western knowledge might start to be regarded as a local or provincial knowledge (Chakrabarty 2000)—knowledge that is locally produced but has gained its apparent universality through being projected outwards throughout the world through colonial and neocolonial power relations. Thus, according to Escobar (1995), the domination of Western knowledge is explained not through a privileged proximity to the truth, but as a set of historical and geographical conditions tied up with the geopolitics of power. This move forces recognition that so-called “powerful” Western discourses are also partial and fragmentary, often involving knowledges and practices emanating from “indigenous informants.” In turn, this challenges the idea of a precise dichotomy between indigenous–Western knowledge formations, moving us towards a position of multiepistemic literacy (see Sundberg 2014, 34). In making this conceptual relocation that unsettles the hegemony of Western knowledge and challenges the strict indigenous–Western binary, space is cleared for indigenous knowledge to be relocated as one of many legitimate and valid (albeit sometimes competing) knowledge formations. This enables moving beyond “anthropological particularism”—in which indigenous knowledge is seen as unchanging, pristine, traditional, or local, in opposition to modern, universal, global, Western knowledge—towards a position in which *all* knowledge might include mysticism, spiritual ontologies, and ritualistic methodologies and in which *all* knowledge is considered partial and emerging, but at the same time also place-specific or situated.

### ***Research with No Guarantees: Troubling over the Research Process***

However, this creation of a long-term dialogic relationship, which identifies and validates multiple ontologies and polycentric epistemologies, is not easy to achieve. It will include a commitment to respond to issues raised by research communities, a willingness to engage in continuing dialogue that takes into account the conceptual landscape of all those involved in the research process, and an awareness that, despite a shared desire to participate in empowerment politics, there may be contested meanings about what empowerment might entail or how it might be achieved. In other words, from the outset of the research it is important that all parties involved acknowledge that there are *no guarantees* of successful emancipatory outcomes (de Leeuw et al. 2012; Noxolo et al. 2012). Rather, these outcomes must be carefully worked towards through everyday research practices and intimate research relations.

This process of conducting empowering research is not likely to be straightforward; indeed, it can create a range of complicated practical issues in institutions (e.g. universities and grant agencies) where a more limited model of research is espoused and reinforced. Moreover, it may be wrought with contradictory and potentially refuted relations and complex emotional investments because the creation of knowledge is never “innocent”—it is always entwined with differentiated relations of power. This constitutes what Smith (2005) has termed “Tricky Ground.” This tricky ground concerns the troubling methodological, ethical, and political issues and inter-subjective relations that require continual communal reflexivity in the process of developing workable research relationships. For example, as researchers we should be acutely aware of the limits to our understanding, ceaselessly grappling with the production of academic work, to acknowledge the limitations of “speaking for others.” This involves being mindful of the risks of appropriation of knowledge creation while always being open to new ways of thinking about and understanding the world. (For examples of the complexities of cross-cultural dialogue see Desbiens and Rivard 2014; Eshun and Madge 2012; and Hunt 2014). This open and hesitant approach is also important during the process of doing the research, as explored next.

## 2. Doing the Research

### ***Employing a Multi-Layered Reflexivity***

As we have outlined earlier, the development of a relationship is the first and primary component of any methodology that aims at empowerment within collaborative anti-colonial research. The

relationship-building component of the research process can take many forms. Bishop (2005) has described the process as one of developing an extended family whose common interests are the agreed-upon research goals and objectives. De Leeuw et al. (2012) have described a process centred upon friendships that extend beyond the research framework, allowing for a more profound critique of the research process and greater reflexivity. Reflexivity has, first through feminist and now also through indigenous research approaches, become key to any collaborative, empowering research methodology.

The reflexivity we outline here, adapted from Ruth Nicholls' (2010) work, encourages a multi-layered approach. This first layer, or self-reflexivity, asks the researcher to explore the hidden assumptions about the research that originate within disciplinary structures or funding streams that enable the work to proceed. It also involves being self-reflexive about the epistemological and ontological assumptions that the researcher brings to the research project, a process that may well involve "unlearning" what one has already learned (see Sundberg 2014, 39). This might be in terms of rethinking the questions asked, or delving deep into analytical and interpretative understanding in the field through ongoing dialogue, or making room for redefining terms of representations or conceptual framings. The researcher should also attempt to become cognizant of the complex and changing power relations inherent throughout the research process, particularly the (almost inevitably privileged) position researchers bring to the relationship. This is especially important for non-indigenous researchers in establishing a critical and dynamic relationship with indigenous collaborators but is also true for women from the global north working with women from other parts of the globe or across other axes of difference.

The development of a research relationship requires the researcher to carry this self-awareness into dialogue with others. This second layer of reflexivity, termed *interpersonal reflexivity* by Nicholls (2010), implies a relationality that necessitates evaluation of interpersonal encounters within particular institutional, geopolitical, and material situations. Recognizing one's role within the (changing) research relationship necessitates that researchers reflect on their ability to collaborate as opposed to lead, control, or delegate. The researcher is commonly placed in between the expectations of academic institutions and the community, navigating the intersection of ethical demands. As de Leeuw et al. (2012, 188) observe, "researchers who carry out participatory projects quickly confront the mismatch between demands of the institutions



within which they operate and their own commitment to build meaningful relationships with the people and places about which they care.”

The third layer of reflexivity, termed *collective reflexivity* by Nicholls (2010), requires all participants to engage in a dialogue about the process of doing research together. What are the terms of participation? Who initiated the research project, and why? Who involved themselves, and why? Whose voices have been heard and what form has this taken? How was the research conceived and carried out, and how did this affect social change and practical knowing? Has the research process been transformative, affirming, cathartic, empowering, and if not, why not, and for whom? This third layer of reflexivity entails a shift in the researcher’s positionality, “a ceding of research control beyond the initial phase of negotiation, and extending participation into data collection, analysis and distribution” (Nicholls 2010, 25). This approach, founded within a radical pedagogy, pushes beyond mere information transfer towards a **critical consciousness** that Freire (2000) argued provides the foundation of empowerment. Conducting empowering research may also be promoted through the employment of dialogic research tools.

### ***Dialogic Research Tools: Reworking the Field as a Methodological Site of Agency***

Raghuram and Madge (2006, 276) argue for the need to explore methods that will make research questions more dialogic. But in advocating dialogue they do not presume that difference can be simply “dissolved” to attain complete understanding, “for there will always be degrees of incomprehensibility and continuing spaces ‘in between.’” However, they do suggest that working through these in-between spaces can “bring moments of enlightenment; glimpses of the world through someone else’s reality and a sense of the losses associated with privilege. From such moments of deep personal and political change more relevant research questions can arise, questions that can potentially challenge the ‘master narrative’ of northern-centred research.”

One research method that might enable such dialogue is storytelling—a research tool “wherein personal, experiential geographies are conveyed in narrative form” (Cameron 2012, 575). This approach to narrating research experiences presents expressive and affective methods that can uncover new understandings and perspectives, or be a means to express different world views or expressions of being in the world. There is also a political potential to storytelling to construct counter-narratives that test dominant discourses and produce social change (Gibson-Graham

2006). A storytelling approach is particularly well-suited to collaborative research with indigenous communities as there are many synergies with indigenous forms of knowledge creation and sharing (Christensen 2012). However, such an approach does raise questions concerning authorship, first- or third-person narration, and issues arising from translating oral stories into text. Storytelling also requires considerable attention to concerns of power and representation (Eshun and Madge 2012; Garvin and Wilson 1999). Despite the complexities of employing more dialogic methods, they can enable inclusion of community research agendas, thus having potential to rework the field as a methodological site of agency.

The importance of thinking critically about the field—the place and the specific context in which research occurs—has been stressed for some time by feminist geographers (see Moss 2005, for example). As research is place-specific and all knowledge production is situated, the critical consciousness advocated by Freire (2000) develops through everyday lived experiences (Johnson 2012). To understand the place-based struggles of different communities necessitates engagement with the experiences, conflicts, languages, and histories they rely upon to construct their collective identity. Here the place of research (or the field) has potential to become an active location of empowerment. How such emancipatory change might be achieved in a particular place involves not only thinking about and doing the research, but also includes consideration of the political outcomes of the research process, as we explore next.

### 3. The Politics of the Research

#### ***Changing Ourselves: Breaking Out of the “Hall of Mirrors”***

As is probably clear from the preceding discussion, the political outcomes of the research process can take many forms. Initially this might be considered in terms of changing ourselves by interrogating, destabilizing, and reconfiguring our underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions. This is an important process in recognizing but also challenging the links between geography and imperialism and moving towards more decolonized versions and visions. Rose (1999, 177) observes that Western science “sets itself within a hall of mirrors...mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its world view.” So how might researchers

break free of this “hall of mirrors” in their research to promote the process of empowerment and participate in social change?

For research outcomes to be empowering, we need to embrace the uncanny realization that multiple ontologies are not only possible but are also the lived reality of most of our fellow humans. Putting ourselves into a space within which, as researchers, we can begin to glimpse these alternate but equally valuable ontologies requires us to challenge commonly accepted frameworks and hidden assumptions in a shift towards breaking out of the “hall of mirrors.” This will involve the relentless need for a rigorous interrogation of the politics of speaking and writing, and being open to opportunities to criticize and challenge dominant world views and propose alternative agendas rather than adding to existing ways of thinking about the world and conducting research. This process is likely to be demanding. Avoiding co-option of groups on the margins of society and appropriation of their knowledges and world views will involve constant vigilance and an active political agency on behalf of all those involved in the research process. It will take courage and determination to avoid propagating an underlying neocolonial “business as usual with the odd tweak,” to move beyond existing knowledge formations, experts, and institutional structures of power.

### ***Changing Institutional Structures and Processes: From Research “for” and “with” to Research “by”***

It is clear that there will be no easy and definitive answers, but a careful working towards dismantling, or at minimum acknowledging the complexity of, the historically produced power geometries (of imperialistic, white supremacist, capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchy) upon which geographical research is based is crucial. It is only by “stepping outside” hegemonic systems of knowledge production that a shift in the paradigms of research can begin. As Kuhn’s (1962) work has demonstrated, these shifts are frequently concurrent with social and political upheavals that not only upset the rationalized frameworks of science and research, but also question fundamental social structures that perpetuate colonialism, imperialism, homophobia, racism, and sexism. Following the manner in which feminists have occupied and changed the academy and its knowledges, everyday practices, and politics, indigeneity as a social movement operating both inside and outside of the academy is now also placing pressure on these hegemonic societal structures of control.

By placing pressure on the academy, indigenous geographers are beginning to uncover “the spaces between intellectual and lived expressions” of indigeneity, prising open gaps in regimes of knowledge production and providing “sites where ontological shifts are possible” (Hunt 2014, 30). The trick to identifying these “gaps” to facilitate ontological shifts requires that researchers respect the autonomy and independence of indigenous organizations (Sundberg 2014). By serving as “allies” in support of the self-determination of indigenous nations, and as collaborative partners focused on the research agendas of those communities, we also serve to broaden the ontological foundations of our discipline and the academy. Serving as allies in research and struggle, though, is only one step in the process of aiding indigenous research agendas. As Coombes (2012, 290) identifies, a Freirian approach to research identifies collaboration as a “mere intermediary step towards the democratization *and* dissemination of knowledge production itself.” The final step is the fostering of “communities’ capacities to complete research for themselves” (Coombes 2012, 291). This can be seen as the final prepositional shift, from research “for” and “with” to research “by” indigenous peoples.

## **Summary: A Critical Reflection**

Qualitative research methodologies in geography have been significantly influenced by feminist and indigenous research practices in the past few decades. Both feminist and indigenous approaches have moved geographical research towards more empowering methodologies. However, as this chapter has illustrated, employing empowering methodologies is not easy and involves careful reflection regarding approaching the research (for example, the development of long-term dialogic relationships and the validation of multiple world views), doing the research (for example, employing a troubling multi-layered reflexivity and using dialogic research tools), and the politics of the research (for example, “stepping outside” hegemonic systems of knowledge production and challenging academic institutional structures). Nevertheless, if employed thoughtfully and compassionately, empowering methodologies can move qualitative research towards more inspiring, meaningful, and potentially transformatory and equitable outcomes.

## Key Terms

critical consciousness  
empowerment  
indigeneity  
indigenous methods  
multiple ontologies  
pluriversal world  
polycentric epistemologies

## Review Questions

1. How would you define empowerment? In what circumstances might you use it as a strategy for qualitative geographical research, and why?
2. Critically discuss the potentials and limitations of empowering methodologies. Consider the ways in which these limitations might be ameliorated.
3. Find an example of geographic research that has used an empowering methodology. How was the project initiated? What were the outcomes of the research for the different individuals/groups involved? How would you evaluate the “success” of the project?
4. Do you need to be a woman to do feminist research? Can an indigenous researcher only do effective research with indigenous communities? What skills and attributes do you need to have or develop to be able to undertake research with such (diverse) groups using empowering methodologies?
5. Outline some of the ethical issues involved in using empowering methodologies in geography. How might you negotiate these issues through the research process?

6. Does place matter when using empowering methodologies? Justify your viewpoint.

## Review Exercise

Read the following paper:

Eshun G. and Madge C. 2012. “Now let me share this with you: Exploring poetry for postcolonial geography research.” *Antipode* 44 (4): 1395–1428.

In small groups, debate the following issues:

1. How was poetry used as an empowering methodology?
2. Consider some of the potentials and problems of using poetry as a research method. Do you consider this approach was successful? Justify your viewpoint.
3. How and why did the use of poetry allow the researcher to “be (de)centred” in the research process? How and why did it (re)inscribe marginality?
4. In what ways were issues of relationship, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution raised in this project?

## Useful Resources

Johnson J. and S. Larsen. 2013. (eds) *A Deeper Sense of Place: Stories and Journeys of Collaboration in Indigenous Research*. Oregon State University Press. Corvallis, OR. The stories, essays, and reflections collected in this book offer insight into the challenges and rewards encountered by geographers in their academic and personal approaches to research when working collaboratively with indigenous communities across the globe.

- Louis R. 2007. "Can you hear us now? Voices from the margin: Using indigenous methodologies in geographic research." *Geographical Research* 45 (2): 130–9. This article argues for participatory and indigenous-led research agendas and methodologies so that research can be carried out in a respectful and ethically sound manner.
- Moss, P. 2002. (ed.) *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods*. Oxford: Blackwell. This book gives a thorough introduction to taking on, thinking about, and doing feminist geography research.
- Moss, P. 2005. "A bodily notion of research: Power, difference and specificity in feminist methodology." In L. Nelson and J. Seager, eds., *A Companion to Feminist Geography*. Blackwell. Oxford. pp. 41–59. A thought-provoking chapter that urges researchers to take seriously the principles of feminist methodology they use and to be critical about the context in which research takes place.
- Parpart J.L., Rai S.M., and K.A. Staudt. (eds.) 2013. *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World*. London: Routledge. This book explores the uneven and highly contested terrain of gender and empowerment, illustrated through case studies from a variety of places. Includes chapters on education, cyberspace, the nation state, micro-credit, and NGOs.

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