Can the Colonizer Decolonize? Ethical and Methodological Dimensions of a Research Project with Ethnic Minorities in Colombia

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Introduction

This year's "Social Solidarity Economy & The Commons" Conference called for an enactment of the *pluriverse,* bringing forward a concept that proposes a world where different epistemologies and ontologies coexist, in a universal project, as stated by Mignolo (2018), respecting, and coexisting with Nature's biodiversity. Although the theme's conference is focused on alternative forms of economies, I propose to contribute to this debate with reflections on methodological and ethical implications of social research impaired with the objectives of a universal project for a *pluriverse*. I raise my own reflections as a doctoral student, hoping to call for a debate between young scholars addressing these topics. I assume that, to contribute to the *pluriverse*, one must acknowledge and address from which standpoint they are coming. Whether as researchers, activists, or individuals within this field, our respective backgrounds will create impacts on how we frame knowledge and epistemologies. Reflections on the ethical and methodological dimensions should be a crucial aspect of any research. However, this comes as something especially important when the theories that we engage with - such as critical feminist or decolonial theories - depart from the idea of a context of structural and symbolic dominance and power within societies. Although the decoloniality of methodologies is not a recent debate (see, for example, Smith, 2009; Datta, 2018; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021), I believe the individuality of each research or activity can be discussed, as it brings different forms of positionalities and matters to the theoretical and methodological debates.

This realization became more apparent to me as I embarked on the design of my doctoral research proposal. The proposal centers around exploring the expectations and experiences

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of birth and motherhood among Indigenous and Afro-descendant women in Colombia, examining these aspects through a decolonial perspective. Hailing from Portugal, a country situated in the Global North, and attending a university where engagement with critical theories is not as common, I began contemplating the ethical considerations surrounding my role as a researcher in Colombia. This contemplation extends beyond the dynamics of being a researcher from the Global North seeking to comprehend phenomena in the Global South. It also involves an examination of my identity within categories that I identify as: white, middle-upper class, woman, and childless, acknowledging that numerous other categories could be considered. From the rise of these questions, my paper was born. More than just an exposition, this paper is an invitation for a debate, a call to reflect and question ethical dimensions, as well as asking for critical insights into our roles as researchers. Therefore, the title, *Can the Colonizer Decolonize?*, comes as a provocative question: Can I, as a European researcher, go to the Global South and engage decolonial theories in my projects? While in the second part, *Ethical and Methodological Dimensions of a Research Project with Ethnic Minorities in Colombia,* is the actual focus of this essay – highlighting my own ethical and methodological concerns, along with strategies that I thought would break, as much as possible, what could become unethical procedures of research. These reflections have been the result of joint discussions with my supervisors, who co-wrote this proposal with me.

Birth in the Time of Decoloniality: Maternal Health of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Women in Colombia

The provisional title of my doctoral thesis reveals its main interests. It aims to research the interactions between the biomedical and the autochthone birth models in Colombia, focusing on how these interactions affect women's experiences and expectations. It also aims to understand what it means to have a good birth and motherhood experience through women's perspectives, going beyond maternal health indicators measured globally. The biomedical or technocratic model of birth has risen from the mid-XX century onwards in Europe and the United States, and it was later spread to other regions of the World (Selin, 2009). It is characterized by the medicalization of the body and birth, turning this event into a pathology, rather than a natural event in society and the course of human life (Davis-Floyd, 2003). Over the years, midwives were substituted by obstetric doctors and the number of medical interventions during birth (such as the use of synthetic oxytocin, episiotomies or c-sections)

has increased. Although this model meant a decrease in the risks of maternal morbidity and/or post-partum complications, the medical interventions became routinary and often considered unnecessary (Odent, 2013; World Health Organization, 2018), constraining women's bodily autonomy during birth. This model also meant a forgetting of ancestral knowledges of midwifery all over the world. Finding the remnants of Indigenous and Afro-descendant midwifery in Colombia will hopefully contribute to avoiding what some scholars are calling an ethnocide of traditional birth models in Latin America (Lavín et. al., 2021), as well as understanding how medical systems have affected women in situated areas. Colombia is renowned for its medical system based on a structured pluralism (Basile, 2020), with public-private investments, considered good from an economic standpoint. However, this approach has been associated with growing inequalities and deteriorating health conditions among the vulnerable population (Hernández Álvarez and Torres-Tovar, 2010). Consequently, this research can also be read as a critique of development in Latin America (Escobar, 2014; Svampa, 2019).

Nevertheless, results will only be possible with an empirical approach. For this project, I have proposed to do two different ethnographies: one together with an Indigenous community, and another one with an Afro-Colombian community, both in rural areas of Colombia. Even though the collection of data only begins in 2024, it is worthwhile to address their ethical dimensions from an early stage of research. Before departing, I am considering the issues that concern me from this moment, on how to address and engage with the population that I will be working with.

Methodological and ethical issues

My first concern about my methodological proposal was the population that I would be engaging with. As argued by Smith (2008), researching Indigenous peoples has been problematic for decades: (a) for categorizing groups and social norms within the frames of Western epistemologies; (b) for not always being easy to distinguish what was gathering information for research, from what was gathering information for tourism, through the perspective of the Indigenous peoples. As a foreigner in an Indigenous community in Colombia, both problems can emerge. While the second issue is only solvable by a long time and trust-building relationships with the community I will engage with, the first issue can go

further than that, as some of these categories are structural and maybe even unconscious, originating from my own backgrounds.

In fact, it is what led me to my second concern. Coming from a context of privilege, I understand that I could easily reproduce the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2000). I can end up framing what I see from a Western and Eurocentric perspective, even if that is not what I meant to take with me in the first place.

Both worries brought up another concept to me. Although the *"white savior complex"* has been framed in different fields of study (Cole, 2012; Aranson, 2017), I addressed it as a concept to think about positions that I might unconsciously fall into when doing research. This complex is associated with the idea of a white person depicted as a savior of non-white people, by coming from a Western country to a so-called "under-developed" nation to aid the population in various terms, often neglecting social and historical contexts. The white savior often builds his/her aid based on the Eurocentric imagination that he/she has about the reality of non-Western countries. Once my intention is to contribute to improve maternal health conditions in vulnerable communities in Colombia, I do not want to mistake my position and become a *white savior*. The goal is not to give a voice to women, it is to give space for their voices to be heard (Ribeiro, 2017).

All these thoughts lead to the positional superiority stated by Said (2019), which refers to the inherent power imbalance in Western representations of non-Western cultures. In this context, I can easily be *there* (in this case, in Colombia) or *even think about it*, with truly little resistance, reflecting on the context of privilege where I come from, and affecting my interactions with the communities, therefore affecting my research as well. Despite my position as a European in Colombia, my research can still be valid, as well as the knowledge that I might produce. Following these reflections, I thought about strategies that could potentially avoid colonial mechanisms, as much as possible, during all the stages of my research. They come in different forms: reflections, assumptions, and methodological decisions. Those are what we will be looking at now.

Self-reflection strategies

When I first thought about all the concerns mentioned above, my initial idea was to distance myself from my position as a European researcher. After discussing this with Latin-American colleagues, I came to the realization that this was not a feasible way of dealing with my

concerns. I cannot distance myself from the position I come from. I can, however, assume it. The first step was to assume my role(s). First, as a researcher. Then, as a Portuguese, as a European, as a middle-upper class woman. As a white individual, who does not have children, who never had a birth experience herself. These categories, along with others yet to be identified, will inevitably be influenced by the individuals I engage with, ultimately shaping the lens through which I perceive and conduct my research. Embracing these positions serves as a means of critically reflecting on my perspectives and biases, thereby informing the production of scientific knowledge in the future. As a second strategy, I opened my project for critiques coming from peers, which means debating not only with people from my university or department but also bringing the discussion to moments such as the SSE and the Commons 2023 Conference, where there is wide and international participation from scholars and activists, coming from both the Global South and the Global North, with different perspectives and experiences within ethical concerns. It provides a place to bring my project and to be able to be heard by, mostly and more especially, scholars from Latin America and Colombia. For this reason, I have been presenting my project and its methodological and ethical dimensions to scholars (mostly related to maternal health and gender studies) in different countries from Latin America, to understand how they feel about my research being done by a Portuguese young scholar.

Albeit the most important people I must listen to about this are the participants of the study. Understanding how they feel about my research is of the utmost matter for it to make sense. This means a constant negotiation with them about what I am looking for during my research, but also on what is important for them in it. It also means to be able to ask them about the things I am not sure about - one example could be the categories used to frame themselves, such as Indigenous or Afro-Colombian -, and to respect their informed decision of participating, or not, in my research, and to what extent. Although it was not possible to have their participation from the start of this project, during its design, as proposed by Urrego-Mendonza et. al. (2017), I am hoping that the research counts with their ideas and proposals, as much as possible, in all the future stages of the project.

The final reflection focuses on the theories and methodologies that I decided to address for my research. I am assuming critical theories and methodologies, knowing that they do not intend to only understand the reality that I will be researching but to engage in a critical observation that can transform it for a more equal one. This engages with participatory action

research (Fals-Borda, 1973), seeking intervention for empowerment, liberation, and collective action for structural transformation and with an "observation" that goes beyond that, making myself useful and participating and engaging in the social reality that I will research.

Practical strategies

Reflection and theoretical strategies are important to understand the point of departure for the future steps of research. However, perhaps even more important, is the practice - the empirical application of all the thoughts above. A project framed within decolonial and critical feminist theories must assume a methodology that is aligned with its assumptions - namely, the need to listen to and empower groups of people who have not had the opportunity to speak. In my research case, these are the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian women in rural areas of Colombia. As an anthropologist, I decided that ethnography would be the methodology that would provide me the most time with the participants so that they could trust me and talk to me on occasions that go beyond formalized open or structured interviews. But that also meant understanding the colonial past of anthropology and the role of the non-participant observer (in cases such as Radcfliffe-Brown, 1922, or Evans-Pritchard, 1940), which was not the one that I am planning to address. Participant observation means being with the community, engaging with it, and participating in its events and actions, in a role that is not completely neutral to what is happening. It also means I must distance myself from roles that can affect the results of the research, yet not opt for a passive stance in the communities. Within ethnography and participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 1973), I will still conduct open interviews with women who are willing to offer me a deeper story of their experiences, but I also hope to be able to apply participatory methodologies that engage the participants with dynamic activities. These, for example, include the social autopsy, which is an interview process to understand the social, behavioral, and health system contributors to maternal and child deaths (Kalter et. al., 2011); or other methodological options that I can decide to use during ethnography, such as adapted focus groups or photo-voice. Another possibility is to work closely with non-governmental organizations or collectives that address these topics: not only interviewing them as a part of my research, but working together with them in the field, also understanding their main constraints, and if my research project can be any helpful for future programmes.

Collaboration with participants will be important even after the collection of data if I intend that the results will be useful to the world outside academia. Cooperating with participants, members of non-governmental organizations, and community members and communicating my research findings in events that go beyond scientific conferences is a crucial step that will be done in the last stages of research.

Another important aspect comes with how to apply the theories within the project I am framing. My intentions are not to understand what type of assistance model to birth is objectively the best. I am advocating for a situated approach, and I assume that each model has characteristics associated with women's health and empowerment, and the newborn's health. Therefore, knowledge produced in each birth model can be useful, translating into a critical intercultural model as defended by Walsh (2012), or in a pluriverse of epistemologies, as we have been debating (Mignolo and Escobar, 2010).

The diversity of epistemologies extends to the theoretical approach as well. Coming from a European university, it would be accessible to frame all my research within Anglo-Saxon and French schools of thought. It could be an option to frame it only, or mostly within Latin-American schools of thought- or even with the use of works produced by women if I would like to give it a full feminist perspective. Regardless, I consider that various thoughts can be valid coming from different origins - giving a context to what's being produced and how it has been produced -, and that engaging theories and thoughts from different backgrounds can be more interesting, useful, and debatable for my proposal. Therefore, I propose to address authors who are Portuguese, Spanish, French, and northern-Americans, in line with the authors that come from the region that I am working in - Colombia, but also Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and other Latin-American countries and thoughts.

One last aspect that I considered important to make my project possible, was to make sure I was not assembling the project only from Portugal. Prior to the two ethnographies, some months of research will happen at a university in Colombia, where I will be supervised and work with local scholars who have engaged with the same communities I will later visit. Hearing their perspectives and critical thoughts on my project is an essential part of understanding the reality I am traveling to. It is with them, as well, that I should decide in which region and community of Colombia I will go to.

<u>However: is this enough? Future steps of research</u>

All the concerns that I am reflecting on, as well as the strategies that I am thinking of to overcome some concerns are merely thoughts in the first stages of a research that will last, at least, four years. Some of these concerns might grow or diminish over time, while other problems might occur. While so, other questions remain in my mind. Does reflexivity, a critical reflection on the research process itself, save me from the issues that I worried about in the first place? Will understanding my own role as a researcher, including my different insider and outsider positions, knowledge, interests, and values, and how they influence the research (Clarke & Braun, 2013), help me to overcome ethical dimensions? As Lockard (2016) states, admitting white privilege is not enough, as the speech itself does not combat racism. It surely makes me conscious about my role and my place during research. However, is it just a way of distancing myself from future confrontations? While that is not my intention, I know that certain ethical debates can remain eternally debatable. What I can do, for now, is to make sure that I am in line with my principles, and that the people with whom I am collaborating in the process (my close peers, but especially the participants) are engaged with and can benefit from something that comes with it.

On the other hand, does this consciousness affect the results of the project? Will I be so concerned about the ethical and methodological dimensions of the research, that I will forget that I am also producing knowledge for the scientific community? During ethnography and data analysis, I should be aware of my positions, but also be as objective as possible in the moment of producing results.

Other questions remain unanswered. Can I quote authors whose knowledge I value, even though their actions go against the principles they evoke? Can I pick up social categories (Indigenous, traditional, ethnic minorities, Afro-descendant, among other categories) that represent the people and how they feel? And if I feel that the theories that I initially emerged do not make sense anymore, is it ethical to change the aim of the project?

Years of negotiation (with myself, with the participants, with institutional demands), reflexivity, worries, and research are ahead. This comes as a first summary of my major concerns, as well as some of the strategies that I developed to overcome, as much as possible. I hope it is a paper that can inspire other scholars to do the same: to reflect on their positions, their methodologies, and their ethical dimensions. I hope it is a paper that brings out a debate on these topics. That scholars can reach out to each other, critically and constructively, and question each other. Even if questioning sometimes can lead to no change, and in the end,

people agree to disagree. The provocative thought of an interesting debate should be useful to improve each other's research projects, as well as to improve one's position in the field.

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