

Critical reflections on practice: the changing roles of three physical geographers carrying out research in a developing country

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Abstract

To date, discussions on positionality and the relationship with research collaborators have been very much in the human geography realm. In this paper, we explore issues of expertise, positionality, collaboration and participation from our perspective as physical geographers working in a developing country context. We trace our journey from identifying ourselves as top-down 'experts' to participatory 'facilitators', and the difficulties and dilemmas encountered during this journey as we coped with the contrasting challenges of academic demands and local necessities. Our experiences highlight the many assumptions we make about doing research in developing countries and the real lack of capacity in these places to undertake typical short-term research projects designed in the developed world. We conclude with a call for a longer term and deeper commitment by physical geographers to the people that we engage with in our research.

Keywords: Guyana, expertise, positionality, participation, physical geography

Introduction

The trademark of much natural sciences research, including physical geography, is the development of precise and time-limited research projects, rarely exceeding more than five years, with intensive periods of field work collecting biophysical data, followed by numerical analysis of results, and (hopefully) swift publication within a range of specialised academic journals. In many ways, this could be described as the execution of a highly technical project by individuals specialised within narrow disciplines, but often working as part of multidisciplinary teams, with the specific objectives of producing tangible outputs (peer-reviewed articles, research reports). Although there has always been an 'applied' element to physical geography research (Stoddart, 1981), suggesting some link to communities, policy makers, activists and officials, the extent of this engagement varies in its closeness, intent, transparency and effectiveness. There is also a preconceived notion within the natural sciences in general, that somewhere down the line, research outputs will be 'useful' to society. Scientific enquiry, including the natural and physical sciences, is principally seen as the pursuit of 'truth'. It may seem self-evident that any scientific research plays a central role in determining the activities of governmental agencies, private enterprise and public interest groups, since all of these depend on supposedly impartial evidence to support their policies and actions. Thus, there is the perception that physical geographers in general do not necessarily need to become involved with the messy and often time-consuming socio-political processes of engaging end-users and/or translating research outcomes into practices which will lead to direct change. This is usually left to practitioners, activists or politicians.

Our generalisation implying that physical geographers often disengage and distance themselves from 'end-users' can partly be explained by the supposedly 'objective' and 'neutral' (positivist) paradigm in which much natural science research is carried out. Here, the natural scientist is viewed as the 'expert' on her/his specific subject area, and training received is predominately technical in nature, especially in executing the 'scientific method' as outlined by Gordon (2007). The authority of the 'expert' is maintained by the fact that she/he continually identifies problems, categorises and labels them and then intervenes to research the solution (Escobar, 1995). This top-down approach to defining and solving problems does not normally actively engage end-users but considers them as, in the first instance, the passive source of information, and ultimately, the passive recipients of knowledge. There is also the perception that involvement with end-users could be interpreted as commitment to a 'cause' which may threaten the standard and validity of the research and ultimately undermine the authority of the voice of the 'researcher as academic' (Fuller, 1999). In the introduction to the book, 'Emotional Geographies', Bondi *et al.* (2005) aptly state that "on the surface, the discipline of geography often presents us with an emotionally barren terrain, a world devoid of passion, spaces ordered solely by rational principles and demarcated according to political, economic or technical logics". In addition, within the current audit and commodity environment of academia, where scientific research quality is measured through research grant income, numbers of high profile publications and 'evidence of policy impact' (see Castree and Sparke, 2000; Sidaway, 2000; Demeritt, 2000; Sparkes, 2007), there is less concern about demonstrating the immediate and local relevance of research and greater pressure to produce the appropriate academic indicators of success.

In this context, we explore our changing roles as three physical geographers, who having had extensive postgraduate training while based in the UK, went on to carry out academic research within developing countries. We outline how woefully inadequate our expertise was in engaging with the reality of carrying out research of direct relevance to our research subjects while, on the surface, 'producing' research outputs highly regarded by academia. We trace our journey from identifying ourselves as top-down 'experts' to participatory 'facilitators', and the difficulties and dilemmas encountered during this journey as we coped with the contrasting challenges of academic demands and local necessities.

Research context

Our research context is an integrated conservation development project based overseas, and although these have been extensively criticised (see McShane and Wells, 2004; Garnett *et al.*, 2007), our aim here is not to analyse the failings of these types of projects. Instead we aim to describe our own experiences of working within this area as a way of reflecting more generally on the issues that emerge and the problems encountered when physical geographers conduct field research in this context, especially because physical geographers and natural scientists in general, are usually considered key participants and often lead these projects.

Our research takes place in Guyana, South America. Guyana is an economically poor, but natural-resource rich country; partially as a result of restrictions on external investment and natural resource exploitation during the socialist government of the 1960s and 1970s at a time when many other developing countries were implementing massive World Bank sponsored liberalisation programmes. However, since democratic elections in the early 1990s and the resulting economic liberalisation, exploitation of natural resources in the interior through logging and mining, particularly by foreign investors, has experienced a dramatic increase. As a result, land tenure has become a major issue for the remaining Amerindian communities living in the interior – few have rights to the land they have subsisted on for centuries and as a consequent, they are vulnerable to state licensed resource extraction activities where the Amerindians rarely see direct long-lasting benefits and frequently experience the loss of their traditional livelihood activities.

First encounter: water quality analysis of North Rupununi rivers and ponds

In early 1999, we were contacted by an anthropologist working in the North Rupununi district of Guyana, close to the Brazilian border. The anthropologist had been working on health issues with the local Amerindian communities, and their worries about the potential impact of activities such as mining on their fish populations had provoked her to seek advice on measuring water quality in the local rivers and ponds. In response and through discussions with the anthropologist, we organised a short exploratory expedition where we measured water quality in different river and pond habitats.

Our role within this particular research exercise was relatively precise. We were to use a range of advanced water quality testing techniques to identify pollutants within a wide variety of water sources over a limited time period. Our contact with local people during this trip was minimal in that we mostly worked through an experienced field assistant to accompany us, and interact with communities to get us access to sites or to find out additional land use information that was required for the data analysis.

At the end of the trip, our ‘dissemination’ to the local people was a presentation of the results at a two-hour workshop at one of the villages, and a short written report (primarily written for the funding bodies) which was subsequently sent from the UK to the village (we later found out that the Guyanese postal system failed to deliver the item). Our dissemination to the academic audience was a journal article (Mistry *et al.*, 2004) which was a significant boost to our career prospects.

Academically and scientifically, we believed the research project to have been a success. We were able to collect meaningful data in sufficient quantity within a short time period to produce results deemed to be of sufficient quality and relevance for publication in an international journal. Yet, the baseline data on the pristine nature of many water bodies within the region, and one of our most relevant findings - extremely low pH levels within some wells used by some of the communities - became virtually inaccessible to stakeholders within Guyana, since there was no reasonable expectation that they would have ongoing access to the published article. We assumed that the findings in the report we sent (but never arrived) would be taken up by local practitioners, including the anthropologist, and that our role was completed.

Hitting the big time: the six-figure funded project

During this first visit to Guyana, we had met a Guyanese biologist and a local leader who both encouraged us to expand the work we had done and link it to local biodiversity. The biologist worked for a national environmental NGO, the senior staff of which at the time was mostly comprised of expatriates – the biologist himself was a Guyanese national but had British parents and had carried out all of his education outside Guyana. We felt a ‘natural’ affinity with the organisation and its senior staff – we all ‘talked the same language’ - and they became our principal partner for project development. At the same time, the local leader, a highly eloquent, well travelled and experienced person, also encouraged us to develop the work we had previously carried out and link it more directly with the local communities. We decided to target a particular UK government conservation/development fund that focused on helping countries fulfil their obligations to the Convention on Biological Diversity through transferring UK expertise. Thus the approach we took in developing the proposal, enshrined in the particular fund we were targeting was, as Parpart (1995) states, based on the assumption that some people and places are more developed than others and therefore those who are “developed” have the knowledge and expertise to help those who are not. Indeed, our ‘expertise’ was the principal proponent behind the project – we included methods and outputs in respect to our core knowledge and skills. This included mostly quantitative monitoring and evaluation of the biophysical characteristics of a wide range of water bodies within the North Rupununi, and then using this information to develop management plans, prescriptive and regulatory in nature, for the area

As ‘experts’ in the field of natural resource management we were what Kothari (2005) describes of development professionals, “conduits and translators of a meta-language reflecting a particular view...and practice”. In addition and although never expressed directly, we were steered by the principal partner organisation to focus on building capacity for the technical execution of biophysical monitoring and evaluation techniques, and for the development of a biodiversity management plan. It was made explicit that we were not to deal with the socio-political issues at stake in the region,

probably because as foreign researchers we were considered ignorant of the local issues and unrehearsed in the 'politically sensitive' modes of communicating, especially when it came to critiquing local and national government. This came to the fore when one of us was severely reprimanded for raising issues of natural resource governance and control during a newspaper interview. On reflection, we felt that this was a reasonable response considering our relative ignorance of the political situation.

Since we needed a number of partners to implement the project and its outputs (particularly the data collection and capacity building activities), we also included other Guyanese institutions in the proposal, including the governmental environmental protection agency, the national university and the local Amerindian communities through an umbrella NGO. The proposal had to be approved by all of these organisations, and we assumed that the explanation of the project and its outputs given to all the partners by our principal collaborator would ensure that everyone had a full understanding of what the project was about.

The proposal was submitted and the project was funded. This was another significant boost to our academic careers. Twelve staff members were recruited from the partner organisations to work on the project. The recruitment process was coordinated by the principal partner organisation and we expected that this had been carried out in a professional and transparent way, with the most appropriate individuals selected for the various tasks that needed to be undertaken. Our new role was to transfer our 'expertise' to our twelve staff members, through intensive field-based training and capacity building activities, and as such we visited Guyana once a year for short periods of two to three weeks. For the rest of the year, we relied on e-mail communication for monitoring progress. Other roles included making sure that the Guyanese partners received the necessary financial resources to pay the staff salaries, cover fieldwork expenses, and support the partner organisations through overhead payments. Our funding body also required regular reports on progress and financial expenditure, which we duly filed.

Our first visit to Guyana on the project involved a workshop with all the new project team members. The methodology for data collection was presented and subsequently refined. Our approach was to develop a shared understanding of the task on hand by discussing which sites to carry out the monitoring and modifying the sampling techniques to suit the logistics, available equipment and staff capacity. This would be followed by trials of the methodology in various sites around the area.

It was at this stage that we first became aware of the social dynamics within the group. Having worked together in the past, it seemed normal for us to discuss things openly, and frequently exchange constructive criticism with respect to personal opinions and ideas. On the other hand, most of the local team members said little in group settings, and when questioned directly on issues, tended to agree with us or what had been proposed. They were also disconcerted by our public displays of disagreement. Being teachers as well as researchers, we tried various methods to get team members to participate in providing feedback, including working in smaller groups, using different communication techniques (diagrams, role playing, etc) and allowing opportunities for anonymous evaluation. Although this did improve communication, there was still a distinct lack of criticism that could either directly or

indirectly be linked to us and so our overall approach in terms of monitoring techniques and site selection did not change.

We returned to the UK and the Guyanese team members were left to start collecting the data. From this point on, communication, which had to be done mostly through e-mail, was ad-hoc. Although we regularly sent e-mails requesting updates on progress, these were rarely forthcoming. We initially assumed that the remoteness of the area, meant that there was much time when they were out of contact. Even when they were in the capital, Georgetown, we assumed that there were technical difficulties in accessing the Internet on a daily basis. However, as time went on, and through the occasional brief communications, we realised that everything was not going well in the project and the lack of communication was partly fuelled by not wanting to tell us that things were not going according to plan.

Most of the technical equipment left with the team for measuring certain parameters, such as water pH and conductivity, had broken down in the first few months, probably due to a combination of the environmental conditions and mishandling. Logistics seemed to be a major problem, with transportation becoming unavailable because partner organisations were using the vehicle for other purposes, such as supporting tourist trips. Several staff were also coming down with regular bouts of malaria which reduced individual and team capacity to carry out certain activities. Finally, the paper-based survey sheets used in the field were left piling up, and not entered into the computerised database as originally planned, which would have also allowed for some data verification and querying of anomalous data. As such, gaps were beginning to appear in the data collection.

Thus, the first issue that we had to contend with, in our new roles, was understanding why the usual process of scientific investigation and open constructive critique we were accustomed to was not working, both in the face-to-face situation and once we had returned back to the UK. Why was it that our team members were so reticent in engaging with providing feedback? However much we tried to emphasise and promote participation we began to realise that there were major issues of how we were viewed by the team members and our positions as the 'UK experts'. Our position as foreigners or "outsiders" from the UK, white (two of us), from a higher economic and social status, academics, and perceived to have self-interest in the outputs of the project, as well as our communication styles and upbringing would have certainly contributed to the way that we were seen by the rest of the team. Although our 'authority' may have been slightly disrupted by the fact we were youngish-looking, in general, our 'Dr.' status went unquestioned, no doubt aided by our (generally unconscious) use of the language and symbols typical of the western intellectual class from which we emerge. Our position undoubtedly gave us access to and voice with government ministers, head of NGOs and community leaders, but with our team, a mix of junior researchers (with first degrees) and Amerindian community members (most of whom had not completed school), we were clearly constrained in adapting our approach by their reticence in providing feedback.

A crisis looms

As the first year of the project came to a close, we started increasingly to question ourselves - Why was the research not being carried out properly? Why were we doing

this project anyway? Whom were we really trying to help? Were we just research tourists on a 'tropical jolly'?

The equipment breakdown, the lack of transportation, and the health issues contributed towards a general apathy and lack of motivation from the team towards the project. The monitoring programme itself was extremely challenging as it involved visiting over thirty different sites, each on the same day every month. Problems were exacerbated by many team members not really understanding why they were collecting the data and what it would be used for. Our project partners had assured us during the project development phase that they would have the capacity to implement the research design as well as the project outcomes, and we had been optimistic that project deliverables would be achieved. However, as the project progressed, meetings with individual stakeholders and partners revealed that the major constraint to the effective implementation of the project outputs was the lack of resources (financial, human and technical capacity) at the regional and national scales in Guyana. It became clear that we could not rely on the capacities of our project partners to deliver and implement the outputs as we had originally assumed.

As we placed ourselves in this ethical dilemma - knowing that the project would probably have limited impact in Guyana but a big impact on our own academic 'well-being' – major changes to the way the project was executed seemed inevitable. A significant realization was that our expertise could be viewed by project participants as not as 'scientifically objective and neutral' but biased and political, in that we were promoting an approach that took decision-making control away from local communities and Guyanese nationals in general, and transferred these to a Western scientific elite which had the upper hand in terms of influencing access to financial resources from donor agencies. Thus, it is not surprising that project activities were either subverted or sabotaged in order to meet what was perceived to be immediate local needs and/or constraints.

We therefore concluded that the only way that we could possibly have some impact in Guyana was to try to engage directly with the local communities in promoting biodiversity conservation activities that they would find socially, politically and economically advantageous. In other words, arrive at a compromise position between 'our science' and their immediate local needs, especially because the project outputs still needed, as required by our funding body and employing institutions, to be 'scientific'. The proposal had been developed with a very top-down expert-led approach: collect the biophysical data, carry out the analysis and then publish results/hand over the recommendations to other agencies for implementation. This was our background; this was how we had trained as physical geographers. That is also why the funding body had supported us in the first place – there was little emphasis within the call for proposals with regards to community and institutional engagement which may have required expertise from other fields such as political science, development, economics, psychology or operational management.

To start from scratch using a community-led bottom-up approach was a new field for us, and we argued whether it was right for us, as trained physical geographers, to go down this road. What did we know about this? How much work would it involve for us in terms of individual scholarship? What credibility would we have with our

colleagues both in Guyana and the UK using this approach when we knew very little about it?

The project was designed within a neat, three-year timeline, and making any significant changes to the project at the second year stage was bound to raise major questions. What would be the reaction of the funding body when informed that actually our proposal could not be implemented from a purely natural science angle and we now wanted to overhaul major aspects of it? We were concerned and worried about the effect that might have on our reputations as well as our chances for any future funding from that body or any other. In addition, we had a commitment to the government and national organisations involved in the project to produce technical outputs such as protocols and guidelines, and although we questioned the ability of these institutions, there was still an expectation at this level.

There was also the team in Guyana. We had 'taught' them a suite of techniques for collecting the data and they had been enduring very challenging conditions (difficult fieldwork conditions, intermittent logistical support, exposure to diseases, lack of facilities, etc). How could we now tell them that it had been a waste of time and actually we were going to change everything?

In the end we decided to have a final attempt to discuss these issues openly with the whole team. Airing our doubts out loud with them was a very difficult moment in the project. It was now made very clear that we were no longer prepared to continue playing the role of 'experts'. This was a new situation in that the 'game' - us pretending to know all the answers and them pretending to implement orders - was now gone. Many of them felt very uncomfortable with this. They felt exposed within the team, and to the wider community in which they worked. Our "official" and open failing as experts was also their public failing as research assistants, and they raised concerns about their reputation with colleagues and within the communities they worked. They were also very concerned about the divisions between us three, as we all had differing positions on the situation which varied between 'it's not that bad' to 'it's a bloody disaster!!'. Perhaps it was because of their will to collectively save face that it was decided (through anonymous majority voting) to take a compromise position – continue what we had been doing with regard to data collection to satisfy the scientific outputs expected from the project, but introduce increased and more significant community engagement.

Regardless of anything else, our positionality had changed, but in different ways to different people. For some of our Guyanese team members it was confirmation that so called foreign experts knew little about their country and local issues, something they had believed in from the start but felt powerless to express. For others, we became slightly more 'normal' in their eyes, and the abyss between us and them seemed to become a little smaller. As part of this sudden change in roles, we proposed a shift in our position from experts to facilitators. Team members would move from being research assistants to co-researchers in developing appropriate research outputs that would have a direct benefit for local communities. We thought that giving the team more ownership over developing project outputs would lead to a better working relationship, give them greater self-worth and enable them to make the outputs appropriate for the local communities.

Empowerment or anarchy?

Up to this point, we had taken the responsibility for reporting to the funding body and for the project outputs, all of which were written documents. When we handed over some of the key responsibilities for outputs to the team in Guyana, most of the team seemed happy with the new roles they had in the project. As the months went by, communication was better but still not great, and our endeavours to get progress reports on the outputs from the team were still limited. Our subsequent visits to Guyana also revealed issues around the way people worked. Coming from western academic backgrounds, we had what could be termed a rather 'anglo-saxon' work ethic, where we expect ourselves to work hard beyond the 'nine-to-five' and deliver tangible outputs according to deadlines. We finally acknowledged that many of our team members had rather different work ethics. Firstly, some people started work late, had long lunch breaks and/or were easily distracted to have prolonged conversations about non work-related issues. The latter was obvious in a face-to-face context but was soon also frequently observed electronically via services such as Internet messaging. As we got to know team members better, we also realised that some of them had no real interest in biodiversity conservation and/or sustaining local livelihoods. The financial gains were the single most important motivating part of the project. This was in light of the fact that one of the aims of the project was to build capacity within individuals to continue in this particular line of work! It came to light that local community politics and nepotism had secured the positions of these individuals on the project, which we had not become aware of due to assurances from partners during the initial recruitment process.

Throughout this period, we were consistently promised that the outputs were being worked on, but when we finally received worked versions of these documents, we realised that giving team members responsibility and ownership over the outputs had not had the desired effect. As Wood (1999) suggests, the process of inclusion does not always benefit those who have been previously excluded. There was a clear lack of capacity within the team to engage with writing documents at the level that was necessary. Team members who had first degrees were not able to do basic data analysis or report writing. The initial drafts of documents we had sent them were little changed and as a result, we had to claim back ownership of the documents to complete them in time and to the level required by the funding body, let alone deliver appropriate outputs for use by communities. At the same time, we found out that team members were spending quite a lot of time working on other projects and initiatives, when they should have been working on project outputs, even though these were now much more focused on delivering the needs of the local community. Some of these distracting activities were self-initiated, while others were core partner institutional activities. It very much felt as if there was an un-articulated understanding between Western academics and local partner institutions that once the funding was achieved and therefore the academics got their career brownie points, the local partner institutions could more or less do what they wanted with the project resources allocated to them, including staff time.

Questions therefore arose about our expectations of team members i.e. what we expected them to be able to do. Did we cause more harm than good by giving them responsibility to complete a task that was beyond their interest, capabilities and the agenda of their organisation? There were also issues about the appropriateness of these documents in light of stronger focus on the local communities, many of whom

had poor literacy levels and were therefore unable to gain access to such information. We felt stuck again – wanting to engage more fully with the needs of the local communities, but still being committed to producing documents mostly based on our original approach.

Greater engagement with the local communities and their environment also gave us a heightened awareness of the constraints and problems that they faced on a day to day basis, and it started to put the project into perspective. We had been on a steep learning curve in terms of our practical experience with the project team, but also in terms of engaging with the academic literature on concepts such as participation, community empowerment and bottom-up approaches to natural resource management. We felt that we had to know everything there was to know about these ideas – it helped us feel more ‘secure’ as facilitators to have this knowledge behind us. Perhaps being academics we were also trying to put the actual complexity of the local situation into some simple theories or frameworks that would help organise the messiness of what we encountered in the local context. However, our idealistic notions of what these concepts and ideas meant and how they could be applied were constantly being challenged when we were exposed to the realities on the ground. The local communities were not a homogenous unit, and there existed various strands of power both within and between communities, and between the communities and other agencies working in the area. Participatory activities by external agencies also seemed to have been extensively implemented – communities seemed to have participated in many workshops and training sessions with projects such as ours, but little seemed to have changed as a result. Workshop fatigue was a common problem.

Having more in-depth conversations with individuals, especially our encounters with women, gave us greater insight into the issues of inadequate education, non-existent healthcare provision (in an area where malaria is endemic), gender inequality especially in decision-making structures, and land rights. Alcohol abuse, from individuals to sometimes the whole community, was a widespread problem. Unless these basic social issues were adequately addressed, what chance did our project have of long-term success? Would the money we were given to help develop management plans for the area have been better spent improving local education or providing more health clinics? While we continued battling with these questions, we began to develop a sense of duty towards the communities. We wanted to do something that would tangibly improve the situation, at least for the most marginalised individuals, if not the whole community. This particular journey of responsibility towards the communities has been interrupted by bouts of ‘let’s never go back there again’, stemming from our frustrations of the way people work, the sheer lack of resources available and the personal exposure to significant risk. Yet at the same time, we saw the vulnerability of the communities to pressures such as the ever increasing presence of logging, mining and oil exploration companies, and the potential impact of current government policies on the way the communities will have access to their traditional natural resources, which if applied, will further disempower and impoverish them. We felt that we needed to change our approach once again.

New beginnings

The three-year project came to a close and we felt that the majority of that time had been spent trying to make sense of the whole situation – the location, the people, our relationship with them. It was at this point – the end of the project – that we felt that

perhaps now we were ready and able to contribute something to the communities and wider stakeholders with whom we had worked. There was an opportunity to apply for additional funding from the donor, with the specific focus of putting previous project outputs into action. Again, it was we (the UK researchers) who developed the initial ideas for the second phase of the project, but this time we had face to face meetings with all the project partners and extensive discussions with the project team to develop the proposal. It was decided to use the information collected and lessons learnt in the first project to build further capacity through environmental education in local schools, communities, government agencies and the university, as well as helping individual communities to work through their natural resource issues themselves using a participatory action research approach (see Pain, 2004; Kindon and Pain, 2007). The latter involved each community identifying a goal they wanted to achieve. Our role became that of facilitating the participatory action research as they worked through cycles of collecting information, evaluating that information, making plans of action, and implementing those plans.

The proposal was successful and funded for a further eighteen months. A significant shift in our approach has involved investing in extended periods of face-to-face contact rather than two/three week 'hit-and-run' fieldwork. This has included, for example, a four month sabbatical period in Guyana for two of us with our children, which not only allowed us to establish stronger relationships with colleagues, but also to experience and battle against (and eventually come to terms with) the range of common challenges with local facilities and services.

Basic capacity building

Although improved, we continue to struggle with team members (and ourselves) in terms of communication and work ethic, as well as the general lack of capacity within individuals and organisations to carry out tasks (see also Simon *et al.* 2003). In our attempt to give team members greater ownership and responsibility over the project, and to move from a 'power over' to a 'power with' situation (Rowlands, 1997), we had failed to give enough consideration to the multi-faceted constraints of individuals. Diener and Diener (2005) suggest that attempts at empowerment must address both external (situational) and internal (psychological) dimensions. Although we thought handing over the responsibility for producing key outputs would motivate individuals (and in the short-term it did), actually there were still fundamental external and internal problems.

Team members had to contend with communication networks, namely the Internet and telephone lines, prone to regular breakdown and seriously affected by environmental conditions such as heavy rainfall. And unless they had their own private boat or vehicle, transportation in the field was severely constrained, and during the rainy season, the dirt roads became impassable. And if they got malaria, they were bed-ridden for at least four weeks at a time. In addition, there were institutional constraints i.e. their mostly junior level and roles within their particular organisations and the limits this brought to their day to day work. And then there were also internal capacity issues – lack of self-confidence, self motivation and ability to carry out certain tasks. The new responsibilities actually placed some of the team members under considerable psychological strain, which in the case of one individual led to a nervous breakdown.

We recognize our privileged position - living and working are significantly easier in our context. We do not have to contend daily with the lack of services and infrastructure, the heat, the flooding, the corruption, the incompetence, the intimidation, the disease and pollution, and the never ending requests for help from acquaintances, relatives and friends. Thus, our expectations that our Guyanese counterparts should 'deliver' outputs in the same timeliness and of the same quality are woefully unrealistic. Those counterparts who are not dragged down and do manage to progress should be considered as achieving way beyond local expectations rather than below our standards. As Raghuram and Madge (2006) note, often "the subject of development is a colonized subject who is artificially produced as distinct from the colonizer and whose fate is often linked not to the histories of the production of inequalities but to its own lack of capacity".

We feel that physical geographers must be aware of the inequalities and injustices that enable and allow us to do research in developing countries, and thus we must take responsibility and be advocates for changing practices. For example, Raghuram and Madge (2006) suggest 'dialogic research practice' which involves early engagement and dialogue with collaborators so that "project beginnings are embedded within and take account of the priorities of the researched and not delimited by the concerns of the northern 'experts'". The imperative of funding bodies to achieve significant impacts, either through the top-down scientific/policy approach or through the bottom-up participatory action research/empowerment approach within short-term projects is also woefully unrealistic. Making project proposals look as though they are 'value for money' is a way of making them more attractive to funding bodies, but perhaps we need to be honest in what can realistically be achieved and accept as a consequence that most of the funding will go to those who have not been as honest. Whichever ways we try to change our practice, it will not be easy considering the current institutional pressures of the academy within which we work.

Positionality

Our first concern with 'collaboration' is about our personal interactions with people in our research. There were and still are, clear issues of positionality of us as UK researchers and academics in a developing country and what that implicates for our relationships with the project team, wider stakeholders and the local community members. As Cook (2005) says, your relative position makes "a huge difference to what exactly gets done by whom, how and where it's done, how it's turned into a finished product, for whom". Although most discussions of positionality to date have been very much in the human geography realm (e.g. Rose, 1997; Mohan, 1999; Nagar and Ali, 2003; Chacko, 2004; see the December 2007 issue of the on-line journal *ACME* for various papers addressing positionality), as physical geographers, we also need to be aware that no research, using any mode of inquiry, has a neutral point of view and that research is not a value-free exercise. We need to be self-reflexive and be aware that all forms of collaborative research in developing countries, whether it involves local informants, field assistants or academics from other places, will have unequal power dynamics (Sidaway, 1992; Kobayashi, 1994; Noxolo, 2006) and we must therefore monitor our position carefully over time both in the research process, and in our relationship with the research collaborators. This includes the gate-keepers of the research (Mandel, 2003; Campbell *et al.*, 2006). In our case, our initial gate-keepers had a strong influence over what we did, how we did it and where we did it.

Our second discomfort with 'collaboration' is the idea of the 'expert'. Are project staff, other academics and local communities in Guyana just there to be field assistants or informants, or can they have more of an equal role in a project? Simon *et al.* (2003) and Cottrell and Parpart (2006) highlight similar concerns within their academic-practitioner collaborative projects. In our case, we came in as the UK 'experts', assuming that we had the knowledge and skills to solve problems in the North Rupununi, and that our approach was the most appropriate, reinforcing the unequal relationship between the "developed" and the "developing" (Escobar, 1997; Crewe and Harrison, 1998). We used a different verbal and body language, displayed authority in what we knew and had academic credentials to prove it. Kothari (2005) suggests that 'expertise' is socially, culturally and geographically informed, and questions to what extent British organisations would be open to learn and receive 'expert' knowledge from people in developing countries. In fact, we learnt quite quickly that we were not the 'experts' when we entered the context in which the project was embedded, and that all of us, we, the team members and the local community members, had important and valid contributions to make in identifying problems and looking for ways to resolve them. We still find ourselves putting forward the ideas, leading the way in many cases, but we try to be as open and inclusive as possible. Thus, what has had to develop even more than our scientific understanding of the local situation, has been our emotional intelligence in engaging with such contexts, including empathy, honesty, commitment, fairness, openness and patience. One team member half jokingly states that in the next project, rather than another physical geographer, we will need a psychologist.

Participation

Being more inclusive and taking a bottom-up approach by involving those conventionally 'researched' in some or all stages of research is the keystone of 'participation' (Pain, 2004). From our experience, collaboration that involves developing a deep shared understanding of a situation will take time and significant face-to-face engagement, something that is limited within projects led by overcommitted academics working within the typical three- to five-year cycle. People work at different rates, which are socially, culturally and ecologically defined, and as such we feel that the timescales at which projects are currently set do not allow collaboration beyond a superficial 'consultation' element. Kothari (2005) talks about how participatory approaches have been professionalized and made technical in application - something you can learn from a manual and apply to any community in a short period of time. Indeed, the theory of participation is very different to the practice (e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kothari and Minogue, 2002; Hickey and Mohan, 2004, 2005; Leal, 2007), and from our experience and observations, most participatory activities in the North Rupununi has been limited to briefly consulting the communities as one-off exercises rather than empowering them to implement the changes they feel are appropriate. In many cases, 'participation' has only benefited a limited number of people (e.g. Gujit and Shah, 1998; Mohan, 1999; Pugh and Potter, 2003) and in some cases has strengthened the power inequalities in traditional research relations (Batliwala, 2007; Mavhunga and Dressler, 2007). It may be fashionable to be 'participatory' – this is especially so in the context of integrated conservation and development projects in which we work – but deep reflection on the power relations, process, representation and ethics in using participatory approaches must be undertaken (Kendon and Latham, 2002; Routledge, 2003; Pain, 2004).

Reflective practice

We continue to question our motives for what we are doing (especially in light of our continued long distance air flights and their contribution to climate change – another ethical dilemma we face) and try to minimise the image of our research as some sort of ‘jolly in an exotic location’ that many people have. We are struggling as we move away from wanting to do research because it is 'scientifically' interesting and may have some notional practical use, to wanting to do research that really makes a difference beyond the academy, and also translating that into how we interact with our students in the teaching environment. Yet, at the same time, we are anxious about the extent to which we can, as described by Fuller (1999), ‘go native’ – become actively involved within the group or community that we are supposed to be engaging with while basing our work here in the UK. Interestingly, Katz (1994) notes that in our normal daily lives we take on various identities in response to different situations, places and people. Yet when moving between the academic and activist identities, anxieties arise. We agree with Fuller (1999) in that it is the fact that political actions are informed by and are reflective of, our personal and emotional issues, that makes us uncomfortable. In addition, there is the fear of institutional reprisal; we represent the ‘institution’ wherever we go as ‘researchers’ and thus how our personal actions could also be labelled as institutional actions.

We feel that we are doing what Fuller and Kitchin (2004) call the ‘dance of the academic’, “wherein academics can be perceived as being caught in a series of different ‘dances’ (teacher, supervisor, mentor, administrator, committee member, chairperson, researcher, writer, editor, reviewer, advisor, examiner, manager, conference organiser, activist), set to different ‘tunes’ (university, students, colleagues, collaborators, contributors, publishers, committees, academic bodies, research and funding agencies, research participants)”. We want to invest in the places, people and organisations where we have built up some sort of relationship and trust; our commitment to action is based on the principles of social transformation, unpacking power relations, building solidarity and having emotional connections (Chatterton *et al.*, 2007).

Conclusion

The question arises as to what is the role of the physical geographer with regards to research collaboration and locality? For us, our role as physical geographers carrying out research in developing countries has changed. We no longer believe that we can carry out objective research which is then handed over to competent organisations for implementation. We no longer believe that there is the capacity in many developing countries to actually carry out the ambitious research projects demanded by funding bodies in the developed world within short time frames. Yet, we strongly believe that as physical geographers we have a social responsibility to the people that we engage with in our research, and that long-term commitment to these people could eventually lead to improvements in their livelihoods and the livelihoods of the communities within which they are embedded.

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