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## Chiapas cross-cultural focus groups: doing research in dangerous and culturally diverse contexts

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# *Chiapas Cross-Cultural Focus Groups: Doing Research in Dangerous and Culturally Diverse Contexts*

di Marco Tavanti\*

## **1. Introduction**

If you travel to Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, the colorful and diverse Mayan indigenous clothing leaves an impression on you. The vibrant colors, designs and shapes embroidered on the traditional dress as well as on cloth sold in the San Cristòbal market symbolically represent the colorful and complex socio-political and economic context of Chiapas. Social scientists working in the complex and violent regions of Chiapas face the challenge of choosing appropriate techniques and effective research methods. Since the early 1960s, anthropologists conducting fieldwork in the Zinacantàn, San Juan Chamula and other nearby indigenous communities collected their data mostly using participant observations and individual interviews with (often paid) bilingual informants (Collier, 1975; Nash, 1995; Vogt, 1969). In my fieldwork research in the complex and conflicting context of the county of Chenalhò, in the Chiapas highlands, I found that focus groups are the most effective research methods (Tavanti, 2003). Yet, focus groups alone are not the solution. The method needs to be contextualized and adapted to the situation of low-intensity conflict and cross-cultural diversity. This was not an easy task. On a few occasions I was not able to promote successful focus groups due to the inadequate preparation, networking and the low level of trust. However, most of my Chiapas cross-cultural focus groups represented a concrete strategy for data collection and the most appropriate method for fostering dialogue, participation and collective analysis.

Although my research employed a mixed method approach that included numerous in-depth interviews, participant observations as well as historical

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and comparative analysis, focus groups proved to be the most successful example of socially responsible research (Federman *et al.*, 2003). The researcher is not only responsible for protecting participants, but also for making the research process a tool at the service of communities and organizations involved. Thanks to attentive inter-personal relations and trusted inter-organizational networks, the idea of focus groups was positively accepted by the participants. As time went on, focus groups and collective interviews soon became the best way for participants to become active in the interpretation, analysis and communication of their experiences. The Chiapas cross-cultural focus groups became the best «way of listening to people and learning from them» (Morgan, 1996, p. 9).

The use of focus groups allows access to research participants who may find individual interviews daunting or intimidating. Numerous researchers use this method in order to create a safe environment for marginalized groups and collective cultures (Madriz, 2000). Creating a safe environment is particularly important with participants traumatized by war, violence, or displacement. In the years following the December 22, 1997 massacre at Acteal, the presence, relationships and dialogical efforts of researchers were complicated by the ongoing counterinsurgency and threat of persecution. The Acteal massacre has been identified as the height of the Chiapas conflict between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), civil society organizations in resistance and the heavy presence of military and paramilitary groups (Eber and Kovic, 2003; Tavanti, 2003). After more than six years from that tragic event in which innocent women and children were brutally massacred by a paramilitary group supporting the PRI party, fear and mistrust affected interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships. As both a researcher and representative of a local international nongovernmental organization, I adopted the methodology of focus groups as a way to foster dialogue, social justice and reconciliation.

In this article I argue that research in culturally diverse contexts needs appropriate methods. It is necessary to go beyond positivistic, quantitative, and individualist approaches to research if we want to understand the narratives of resistance in collective cultures and marginalized groups. Focus groups are even more appropriate to fieldwork research in violent or potentially violent contexts. Research needs to become inventive and open to nontraditional methods. It needs to address the fundamental questions of value-based research, and reconsider the significance of conflict and power to social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Chiapas, with its complex and dangerous contexts, offers important lessons to researchers. It underlines the ethical and social responsibility research must have in order to become an instrument for unmasking and engaging the socio-political and economic powers (Wink, 1986 and 1992). The Chiapas focus groups represent an effective method for promoting social change, cross-cultural dialogue, and the active involvement of participants while conducting research in violent and culturally diverse social contexts.

## 2. The Methods of Chiapas Focus Groups

The focus groups and group interviews I promoted in Chiapas did not replace the importance of in-depth interviews with individuals. Numerous interviews with key leaders of indigenous and non-indigenous organizations have been essential in helping to understand and interpret important data emerging during the focus groups. In spite of the difficulties associated with conducting research in conflict zones, I was able to complete more than 16 focus groups and about 150 interviews between July 1998 and February 2000. In addition to living in Chiapas in 1999, I completed numerous fieldtrips to the Chiapas Highlands, the Lacandon Jungle and to Mexico City where I had the opportunity to create contacts and interview church-based organizations, Mexican civil society organizations and international NGOs representatives. In 1998, during the Mexican government's xenophobic campaign, it was quite difficult to enter and do investigation with «forbidden» organizations. The presence of the Mexican Army and immigration (INM) checkpoints discouraged the presence of foreigners in conflict areas. Nevertheless, I was able to perform weekly trips to these «forbidden» zones establishing precious contacts and fostering dialogue among members of the civil society *Las Abejas*<sup>1</sup> Zapatista autonomous communities, and PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) and Presbyterian communities. In the refugee camps of Acteal, Xoyep and Tzajalchen I conducted numerous focus groups with *Las Abejas*' catechists, founders, displaced people, women, children, human rights observers and members of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT).

The Chiapas focus groups were positively welcomed by indigenous communities influenced by the liberation theology movement and the progressive methods of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcias (Collier and Quaratiello, 1999; Womack, 1999). They were familiar with a similar process of decision making. For example, *Las Abejas*, like other Church-inspired indigenous movements and organizations, they gathered into groups, listened to everyone's opinion, collectively reflected and then made appropriate decisions. The focus group process was not so different from their daily life. Respecting their traditional ways of community dialogue and decision making, I proposed questions that were then discussed among them as a community. At the end of a community dialogue conducted in Tzotzil, they were able to reach a consensus on the answer they presented to me in Spanish. With this research method, I avoided eventual problems emerging with translations usually made for anthropologists by bilingual informants. Instead of relying on the translation and interpretation of one person, I let the community be the interpretative subject. On numerous occasions, the group continued to discuss

<sup>1</sup> The Civil Society *Las Abejas* (the Bees) is a Christian pacifist movement in the Highlands of Chiapas sympathizing EZLN's demands but do not support armed struggle. *Las Abejas* became known to the international community after a massacre occurred in Acteal, a small rural village located in the municipality of Chenalhò, in the Highlands of Chiapas. In December 22, 1997 massacre a PRI affiliated paramilitary group killed 45 indigenous people of *Las Abejas*, mostly women and children. All victims of the massacre were members of the organization *Las Abejas*.

my questions for several days. Then, they would share their reflections during my next visit. With this method, I encouraged community reflections and collective critical thinking. The unexpected receptivity and positive effect of focus groups was due also to the fact that most indigenous communities were constantly practicing similar group discussions and analysis.

The Chiapas focus groups method helped participants to identify and communicate their worldviews and stories of resistance. Through this method they were able not only to release their fears and expose their layer of oppression, but also to advance their collective actions of resistance. Through a dialogue that most often included other representatives of NGOs in solidarity with their struggle, they were able to brainstorm other collective and international resistance strategies. Thanks to the collectivist nature of focus groups they were able to identify collective strategies later presented to larger constituencies and shared with other organizations. A more quantitative and individualistic approach to research would not have produced these effects. Face-to-face interviews would not have been so instrumental for collecting group resistance narratives (Tavanti, 2003, pp. 25-6).

Through the Chiapas focus groups I was able to get the opinion of those people who would normally resist a one-on-one interview. I was able, for example, to establish dialogical communications with Chenalhó PRI sympathizers who, because of the ongoing investigation on the Acteal massacre, would be afraid of improper declarations and therefore refuse a personal interview. Nevertheless, mutual trust and friendship were at the base of this method and of all my investigations. I found my networks of communications between indigenous and nongovernmental organizations, frequent visits to families and people, and my active participation into the religious and social life of the communities extremely important to building trusting and friendly relationships (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003).

The Chiapas focus groups presented the best method for remaining as close as possible to accounts while maintaining a close relationship between the researcher and participants. By focusing on group discussions, rather than on giving a direct answer to my questions, focus groups fostered more participation, consciousness raising and intercultural communication. The community, or group itself, was primarily responsible for hearing, reflecting and contextualizing my questions. They were also the primary actors in defining a consensual answer to communicate to me, and therefore to my readers. Ultimately, the Chiapas focus group became a process for empowering indigenous organizations to reassert their indigenous identities and collective actions of resistance (Nash, 1995).

### **3. Focus Groups and Cultures**

During my fieldwork research among Mayan indigenous people of Chiapas, I encountered a major challenge: cross-cultural communication.

Language in focus groups is of particular importance because «a sensitive understanding of people's lives requires shared symbols, meanings and vocabulary» (Madriz, 2000, p. 840). The use of focus groups is a very appropriate research method for including participants identifiable with collective characteristics of culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991). It was also a good technique for overcoming language barriers and implementing cross-cultural from a collective standpoint. Being fluent in Spanish was essential to my research. However, I also know that not only knowing conversational Tzotzil would not have been enough for a thorough investigation. I was also aware that relying on the translations and interpretation of bilingual informants would not be enough.

The Chiapas focus groups represented an innovative method for letting the community discuss in Tzotzil and decide what to refer back to me in Spanish. During the Tzotzil discussion I was able to concentrate on the observation of non-verbal communications and the interaction between group members. From a leadership standpoint, for example, I was able to observe how their discussions are often done with multiple people speaking at the same time. Yet, when it is time to make a decision, they all pay attention to those who remain quiet. If they have a different opinion or their concerns are not addressed the whole group silences and listen to them. In most of my observations, indigenous groups were able to reach consensus by including, understanding and analyzing diverse opinions and concerns.

The Chiapas focus groups clearly gave more power to participants and more possibility for the researcher to observe interactions. The interactions among group participants stimulated collective thinking and decreased the interaction between the researcher and individual members of the group. Consequently, this decreased the responsibility and subjectivity of the researcher in influencing the discussion and interpreting data. Since the early 1960's Harvard Project in Chiapas, anthropologists have heavily relied on informants (Kemper and Royce, 2002; Vogt, 1994). However, today's social scientists are more skeptical about the objectivity of individual information gathering techniques. The limits are either highly structured or informal individual interviews still relies on the researcher's interpretation. Consciously or not, the researcher's viewpoint and presentation of questions highly influenced the interviews. Focus groups in general, and the Chiapas cross-cultural focus groups in particular, are less direct techniques relying more on the participants' needs, collective cultures and worldviews. This research method well suited Maya-Tzotzil collective identities and participatory models of decision-making.

The advantage of focus groups is that they allow researchers to observe collective human interactions (Merton, 1987; Morgan, 1988; 1996). In the contexts of Chiapas they also allow one to observe leadership practices and inter-organizational communication. Traditionally, Mayan forms of leadership are embedded into a religious-political-economic system of decision-making (Warren and Jackson, 2002). In Chiapas, numerous indigenous communities are identifiable by a traditional leadership hierarchy recognizable in the so-

called *caciques* (Collier, 1975)<sup>2</sup>. *Caciquismo*, due particularly to the evident politico-economic control system in San Juan Chamula, is an autocratic form of leadership practice, often challenged by more participatory leadership models proposed by the liberation and indigenous theology movement.

Focus groups have been a dynamic context for observing how leadership is practiced and legitimized by the community. Through a combination of individual and collective interview methods, I was able to identify how to integrate the analysis of other researchers who only used participant observation and individual interviews (Tavanti, 2003, p. 18). When I presented this question in one of the focus groups with *Las Abejas*, two important elements emerged. First, that the more active role of a few leaders was requested by the general assembly of *Las Abejas* as a concrete response to demands of a fast growing organization. The focus group participants also helped to interpret leadership practices in the context of Maya cultures and traditions. The concept of *cargo*, as service requested by the community for the community, is the foundation of any leadership role and responsibility positions within the indigenous communities (Cancian, 1965).

The combination of focus groups with participant observations offered a unique method for understanding intra and inter-organizational networks. The networks of communication between indigenous communities, religious organizations and student movement have been identified as the essential ingredients explaining the insurgency of the Zapatista organization in 1994 (Collier and Quaratiello, 1999; Harvey, 1998). The Chiapas focus groups facilitated the understanding and interpretation of the intense and complex networks of communications between political, juridical, economic and religious structures of the organization involved (Tavanti, 2003, p. 19). Focus groups also helped me to identify *Las Abejas* dialogical networks of communication between their leadership, indigenous communities and non-governmental organizations. Like other indigenous organizations in resistance, *Las Abejas* was able to effectively employ their communicative capabilities to human rights violations and to organize their collective resistance.

#### 4. Focus Groups and Violence

Culturally adapted focus groups are a more effective method for conducting research in dangerous places. Although still not common, fieldwork research in violent or dangerous places has gained more attention in the literature of research methods (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Lee, 1995; Lee and Stanko, 2003). It is interesting to notice how the use of focus groups has been used as a method of group interviewing in warfare situations. During the

<sup>2</sup> In Chiapas, a *cacique* is a local rural boss generally associated with the local government and the PRI. The related term *caciquismo* indicates the politico-economic and religious power structure of local rural bosses legitimated by the people. *Caciquismo* has been particularly studied by anthropologists in Zinacantàn and San Juan Chamula. See Gossen (1974).

early 1940s, Robert Merton introduced the method of focus group interviews to evaluate the reaction to wartime radio programs (Merton, 1987). The focus of their research, commissioned by the Office of War Information, later the Voice of America, was to measure how radio programs affected the morale of listeners. From World War II to today, focus groups have been widely used for market research, and applied professional research. More recently focus groups have been rediscovered in feminist and post-modern research (Bloor, 2001; Darlington and Scott, 2002; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Madriz, 2000). The Chiapas focus groups represent another development for this methodology. The safe environment and collective reflections stimulated by the Chiapas focus groups advanced healing, empowerment and conflict resolution among participants. Chiapas participants' experiences of violence during their search for peace with justice and dignity challenged researchers to be creative in their methodology. Focus groups are appropriate methods for researchers who orient their work toward collaborative and participatory research for the benefit and empowerment of the community.

The Chiapas focus groups offered three major advantages for effectively conducting research in violent contexts. First, they help participants to unmask the layers of violence. The Zapatistas, leading the way on indigenous claims for rights and culture, helped unmasking the powers of Mexico and their effect on democracy, justice and dignity<sup>3</sup>. As Subcomandante Marcos explains: «the mask is for revealing the truth, unmasking the powers that deceive people: You struggle for power. We struggle for democracy, liberty and justice. That is not the same thing... I know you will say this is utopian and unorthodox, but this is the Zapatista way» (Wheaton, 1998, p. 26). The mask is for revealing the truth about power and violence. Violence in Chiapas is perceived differently by opposing groups. Yet, they all claim justice. On one hand, the Human Rights Center Fray Bartolome de Las Casas (CDHFBC) considers the violence of Chiapas as the effect of a low-intensity warfare between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), the Mexican Army, numerous paramilitary groups and civil society indigenous organizations (Peluso and Watts, 2001). On the other hand, organizations such as *Paz y Justicia* (Peace and Justice) blames the EZLN, international human rights observers and sympathizing civil society organizations, as the only reasons for violence in Chiapas<sup>4</sup>. Whether one interprets the ongoing violent context of Chiapas within its larger politico and economic powers or views violence simply as the effect of inter-communitarian and inter-religious disputes, conflict deeply affects relationships among individuals, communities and organizations. Violence is not just the uprising, the counterinsurgency and massacres.

<sup>3</sup> Zapatista wear sky-masks not only security reasons but also to symbolize how impoverishment, injustice and lack of democracy takes away their collective identities and dignity as indigenous people. See Wheaton (1998).

<sup>4</sup> The controversy between the Catholic related Human Rights Center Fray Bartolome de Las Casas and the paramilitary «civil» organization called Desarrollo Paz y Justicia, A.C. See the CDHFBC report *Ni Paz Ni Justicia* (Neither Peace nor Justice) and the counter-report *Ni Derechos Ni Humanos* (Neither Human nor Rights), see Tavanti (2003).



Violence is also when large companies displace indigenous people to take control of their land. Violence occurs when coffee prices plunge below costs of production and impunity, arbitrary detentions and violations of human, cultural and indigenous continue. Focus group participants were able to identify, discuss and engage into collective actions of resistance against the multiple layers of this violence.

Second, focus groups fostered healing among community participants. In the immediate years following the Acteal massacre, survivors took an active role to present their tragic stories to the many international visitors. Yet, numerous survivors manifested an enduring state of desperation, sadness and fear by retelling this story. According to psychologists and collaborators from other NGOs, Acteal survivors seemed forever caught up in their endless stories of death by retelling this story to the endless first time visitors. The focus groups functioned as an extension to the ongoing community therapy. Participating survivors did not have to represent their tragic stories to me. Instead, they actively engaged in conversation with their peers and leaders of the community. The focus of their conversations was clearly on transforming their grief into active resistance. They engaged in various initiatives and concrete alternatives to their struggles and oppressions. One the most significant outcomes from *Las Abejas* has been the formation of the coffee producers cooperative Maya Vinic. In 2001, *Las Abejas* received the prestigious French Republic Human Rights Award for their courage and creativity to break the spiral of violence and create a promising alternative. During my focus group reflections the creation of a cooperative for organic and fair trade coffee emerged as a possible solution against the exploitation of coyotes (mediators).

Third, focus groups can foster dialogue, mediation and conflict resolution. Since the Acteal massacre, affected communities and organizations live with fear and mistrust. Information about facts on people from «the other side» of the conflict, were often distorted for lack of dialogue. Forming focus groups was not only a good idea, but a necessary method for create a safe environment and inviting diffident people to engage in dialogue. During the height of tensions when communities did not want to dialogue with opposing sides, I used the focus groups and collective interviews to dissipate prejudices and gossip. My questions were also aimed to stimulate reflection and analysis of the situation beyond stereotypes and non-cooperation. Focus groups became the time and space for creation of a «third side» aimed to foster a process of dialogue and nonviolence to bring about a «win-win-win» situation (Ury, 1999 and 2000). Basically, the focus groups helped to envision possibilities of dialogue and peace. Conducting focus groups with wounded people and communities was a difficult course. Yet, the ongoing SIPAZ and Chiapas government's reconciliation initiatives for diverse religious groups involved have been possible thanks to these initial efforts.

## **5. The Lessons of Chiapas**

Focus groups conducted in the context of Chiapas teach important lessons to researchers and research practices. First, it reminds us that cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication are central components in focus groups. Cross-cultural inquiry add layers of complexity to the already complex interactions of focus groups (Patton, 2002, p. 391). Globalization demands us to attentively consider diversity of cultures and uniqueness of contexts. We cannot base our research on «false assumptions about shared meanings» (*ibid.*). On the contrary, ethnography is in its nature cross-cultural. This diversity is even more evident in the multicultural contexts of Chiapas, where indigenous people consider their cultures essential for their resistance and their sense of dignity. Chiapas teaches us that cultural diversity exists among indigenous populations as it does among our globalizing societies. The focus group methodology, along with the less emphasized role of the researcher, should be considered a powerful tool for identifying cultural complexities, relationships, ideas, organizations and/or conflicts. Focus groups should not overlook cultural identities and cross-cultural communication. On the contrary, the Chiapas experience of focus groups shows how this methodology could encourage the «reassertion of indigenous identity» (Nash, 1995).

Second, Chiapas focus groups remind us that successful research depends on building respectful and collaborative relationships. It would not have been possible to have focus groups with the people I was involved with if it was not for the pre-existing relationships with key leaders and organizations. The ethical responsibility of researchers includes sharing data with participating individuals and organizations. It also implies the importance of continuing relationships of solidarity after the specific research is completed. The main reason indigenous people participated in my focus groups was to avoid isolation. They took risks when they chose to participate. They did so because they want their voices and experiences to be shared and known by others. It is the researcher's responsibility to maintain those relationships. Establishing trust, maintaining good relationships, and encouraging dialogue between conflicting groups was not an easy task. It was a delicate networking process that, at times, was not successful due to the high degree of fear and distress in the communities. On those occasions researchers are reminded that the ultimate goal of their presence cannot solely be collecting data. Research is and should become oriented by a higher call to serve the people and communities involved.

Third, Chiapas reminds us that research may place researchers in uncomfortable situations. Contexts of violence and injustice often require researchers to go beyond claims of neutrality and take clear positions. Effective research demands social scientists to become actively engaged in the analysis politico, economic and social contexts. Engaged methods become social science that matters because, as Bent Flyvbjerg suggests, they reflect the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom, or *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Researchers become practical thinkers and wise presences when they place power at the core of their analysis. Power, in this case is viewed as a «dense

net of omnipresent relations» (*ibid.*, p. 131). Focus groups are a method for searching truth and producing knowledge. Therefore, they are privileged contexts for unmasking, analyzing, and generating power as knowledge and power analytically inseparable from each other. Power produces knowledge and knowledge produces power. Research conducted in the midst of power struggles requires a certain degree of courage and commitment. But it also requires researchers to direct their work for the promotion of social change. Chiapas focus groups open new possibilities to listen to the plural voice of others as constructive agents of knowledge (Fine, 1994). Researchers are challenged to become witnesses of the transforming power of plural voices of participants.

Finally, the experience of Chiapas focus groups teaches us the importance of conducting research in participant's own context. Immersing ourselves into their stories, lives, struggles and hopes widens our research paradigms and hopefully makes our research a valid tool for empowerment and social change. This method exemplifies how social research is not a neutral event but a potentially positive contribution for consciousness raising. Focus groups become an eye-opening experience not only for participants and readers, but the researchers themselves.

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