



Participatory pathways: Researching women's empowerment in Salvador, Brazil



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SYNOPSIS

Can research on empowerment be in itself empowering to those that take part in it? If so, how might that research be constructed and conducted, and what kind of empowerment might researchers and research participants experience? This article explores a series of research initiatives in Salvador, Brazil, that sought to integrate transformative feminist principles into the study of women's empowerment as part of an international research programme involving researchers from Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, West Africa, the UK and the USA. We reflect on debates about epistemology and methodology that gave rise to the design of these projects and on the research journeys that these designs brought into being. Contrasting research projects with very different foci, methodologies and participants, the article explores insights from these initiatives for feminist research on empowerment.

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Introduction

In what ways might research on women's empowerment be empowering, both for participants and for the researchers themselves? How might 'knowledge for understanding' be enriched by an explicit concern with 'knowledge for action'? And what role might a reflection on the effects of different methodologies on research participants and researchers play in the choice of methodology for researching empowerment? This article reflects on these questions, drawing on a series of vignettes from research initiatives carried out in Salvador, Brazil, as part of an international research programme, Pathways of Women's Empowerment. These projects shared a common concern with integrating into the research process the principles and practices associated with 'liberating empowerment', an approach that understands empowerment as being fundamentally about challenging the structural basis of women's disempowerment in order to transform society (Ferguson, 2004; Sardenberg, 2009). We examine some of the methodological dimensions of epistemological choices that

gave rise to the design of these projects, and the research journeys that these designs brought into being. Contrasting research projects with very different foci, methodologies and participants, we explore insights from these initiatives for feminist research on empowerment.

Participatory pathways

In their reflections on the politics of transnational feminist praxis, Nagar and Geiger pose two searching questions:

First, how can feminists use fieldwork to produce knowledges across multiple divides (of power, geopolitical and institutional locations and axes of difference) in ways that do not reflect or reinforce the interests, agendas and priorities of the more privileged groups and places? Second, how can the production of those knowledges be tied more explicitly to the material politics of social change in favour of the less privileged communities and places? (Nagar and Geiger, 2000: 2, cited in Nagar, 2002: 183)

The Pathways programme was explicitly concerned with these two challenges. The production of knowledge was 'tied

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[more] explicitly' to, as Nagar and Geiger put it in this quote, 'the material politics of social change'. By working as a collective, sharing strategic and budgetary decisions, and collaborating at the level of theorization and analysis, with each regional hub managing their own programme of research and contributing from this to the whole, Pathways sought to break with prevalent modes of north–south research relationships in which there was no such mutuality. Rather than rendering global south researchers as "local", Pathways facilitated policy and academic engagements in a variety of "global" spaces. Researchers from the global north worked on "aidland", global policy arenas that are primarily located in the capital cities of the global north. Only one of more than 60 researchers could be described as the "foot-loose" Western feminist researcher described by Nagar: Pathways' director, Andrea Cornwall, whose long-standing personal and professional relationship with the Pathways Latin America research hub made her a little less foreign.

In keeping with this ethos, the Latin America hub, co-ordinated by Cecilia Sardenberg from the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia (NEIM/UFBA), developed a portfolio of activist research projects that had as their objective a contribution to the radical transformation of Brazilian patriarchal societal, statutory and political institutions. These were held together by a common commitment to a mode of 'academic feminism' that was alert both to the potential for engaged, participatory research and for the openings available to feminist researchers within policy processes and institutions. NEIM's approach was informed by a long-standing engagement in the women's movement, and close involvement and identification with struggles of marginalized women for rights and recognition. It was inflected with an understanding of gender as inextricable from questions of race and racism, and of the centrality of class in understanding the conjunction of oppression, prejudice and exploitation in the everyday lives of Brazilian women.

Consistent with Latin American feminist perspectives (Sardenberg, 2009), the empowerment of women was seen not only as the process by which women gain greater autonomy, but also as an instrument for the transformation of gender structures. Such a perspective places a greater focus on collective action and consciousness-raising regarding the sources of oppression and inequality, as a basis for individual as well as collective empowerment. A central facet of the approach of the Latin America hub was to see research as a mode of feminist activism, building on NEIM's long tradition of academic feminism and engagement with social movements, labour unions and feminist politics. Consequently, the Latin America Hub developed a participatory approach to research projects that had as their central theme, mode of engagement and focus women's organizing in different arenas and at different levels.

These projects built on NEIM's locations in multiple sites of influence, and deep, long-standing, relationships with movements and local communities. Together, they represented a plurality of sites for engagement in which a variety of methods were deployed. Methods included the 'classic' tools of the feminist and participatory researcher (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Maguire, 1987; Reinharz, 1992): consciousness-raising groups and group discussions (Lather, 1991), ethnographic research (Stacey, 1988), storytelling (McNamara, 2009) and participatory

photography (Wang, 1999). Recognizing the persuasive power of numbers, several of the projects also made use of quantitative methods to construct feminist activist methodologies that could generate both numbers and interpretive depth. Tools included data analysis using secondary data and its re-presentation in a form that would make it legible to a political and activist audience, a questionnaire survey, and the development and use of quantitative monitoring instruments.

Torre and Fine, writing on Participatory Action Research, describe how PAR is rooted in

... the understanding that people – especially those who have experienced historic oppression – hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, frame the interpretations. (Torre and Fine, 2006: 458)

A conscious strategy of the Brazilian projects was to engage participants in framing the questions that were asked and in analysing what emerged. This was common across the projects whichever method was deployed as a vehicle for the process of enquiry. It was one that was as much informed by feminist epistemological considerations (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Lather, 1991; Stacey, 1988) as by the ethics that underpin the use of participatory approaches for feminist research (Brydon-Miller, 2002; Cornwall, 2003; Maguire, 1987).

The emancipatory – 'liberating' – intentions of feminist research may appear at first sight to be at odds with the prevailing ethic in participatory research that calls for the researcher to create completely open opportunities for dialogue and exploration, untainted by normative or ideological concerns. And yet a powerful common thread runs across both approaches. This has roots in the popular education practice of Paulo Freire and his followers that has so influenced Participatory Action Research (Maguire, 1987; Swantz, 2003). It is also foundational to the feminist practice of consciousness-raising. It involves engaging people in critical reflection on the conditions of their everyday lives, prompting them to step outside those lives as lived and to question the beliefs they take for granted about how society and the world are ordered. Further threads connecting participatory and feminist research include a deep concern with social change, a desire to democratize the production of knowledge, and close attention to the location of power in the research process (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Maguire, 1987). These fundamental commonalities offer a bridge between approaches that constitute plural fields of practice within which competing epistemological and methodological currents co-exist (Cornwall, 2003).

Shared epistemological and ethical concerns contribute to these broader points of connection. As 'connected knowers' (Reinharz, 1992: 250), feminist researchers explicitly depart from the conventions of positivist epistemology in which knowledge is separated from the contexts and relationships of its production. Doing feminist research involves coming into proximity, rather than maintaining distance; it is intimately concerned with inter-subjective forms of knowing, including that produced by reflexivity, refuting the fallacy of value-free research (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 2002). Here there are contrasts with models of participatory research, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (see, for example, Chambers, 1997), in which the researcher is represented as a facilitator or

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