

Analysing social-change practice in the Peruvian Amazon through a feminist reading of participatory communication research

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This article analyses the social-change practices of Minga Perú, an NGO in the Peruvian Amazon which promotes gender equality and reproductive health through radio broadcasts and community-based interventions. This analysis, grounded in participatory research methods, reveals a feminist and gender-equitable approach, allowing participants to take the role of leader rather than of passive research subject. Such participatory research methods helped to empower both individuals and their communities in the Peruvian Amazon, encouraging the development of more productive group dynamics and leadership.

KEY WORDS: Civil Society; Gender and Diversity; Methods; Latin America and the Caribbean

Introduction

In March, 2005, several women from Amazonian riverine communities gathered in the town of Nauta, a small community located in the Peruvian rainforest. These women were invited to Nauta by Minga Perú,¹ an NGO which promotes gender equality and reproductive health in the region. Minga Perú's outreach activities include the thrice-weekly broadcast of a radio programme, *¡Bienvenida Salud!* (Welcome Health), and several community-based interventions facilitated by the community health workers or *promotoras*,² local women leaders who act as sparkplugs for change.

On the opening day, sheets of plain paper and coloured markers were handed out to the two dozen *promotoras*. The question was posed 'How has your life changed because of listening to *¡Bienvenida Salud!* and participating in community-based activities of Minga Perú?' The answers were requested in two visual sketches: one to portray their life five years ago (*antes*), the other to portray their life today (*ahora*).

Emira, a 21-year-old *promotora*, drew two sketches of herself (Figure 1) and in an emotive tone noted:

This is my early life. I was unworthy; I was ashamed, I was sad. Now my life has changed, I feel capable of exerting a public function; I don't feel ashamed, I don't have fear. I am

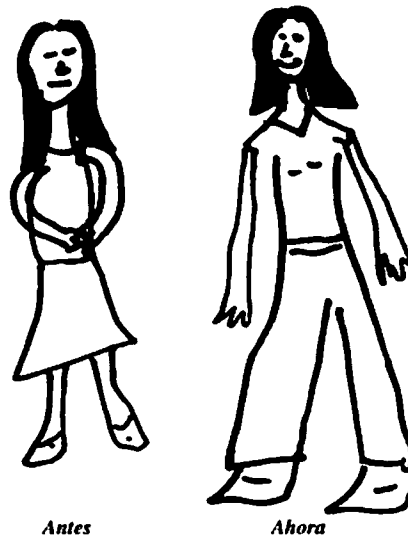


Figure 1: Emira: self-perceptions before and after involvement with Minga Perú

proud of my body – my femininity. Before, I didn't want to cut my hair. . . Now I've cut it. . . Now I feel capable to wear trousers; previously I wore loose clothes. The same holds for my shoes, now I wear high heels.

Emira's sketch and the public expression of her emotions sparked an animated discussion among the *promotoras*. They talked about the role of the radio programme *¡Bienvenida Salud!* and Minga's other interventions in stripping them of shame and guilt, and raising their self-esteem. Many of Emira's colleagues felt compelled to share their own poignant stories. The group dynamics that followed Emira's narrative embodied not only a community of radio listeners, but also a community of marginalised individuals, who seemed to find a collective voice in dialogue and interactions. Later, Emira noted how she gained in self-confidence by publicly presenting her sketch, and how the ensuing group discussion allowed her to view her situation critically from multiple perspectives.

A few weeks later, when the authors met in the USA, we noted how strongly the insights gained from this participatory exercise were aligned with a set of feminist sensibilities. For instance, Emira's emotional public rendering of her sketch evoked highly emotional discussions and responses; the dialogue generated through these emotional interactions helped to connect participants, fostering a palpable sense of community; and, further, the public nature of deliberations allowed participants to view their experiences from multiple perspectives, reflecting both *self-development* and *collective development*.

Through our participants' analysis of Minga Perú's social-change practices in the Peruvian Amazon, this article reveals the feminist orientation of participatory research approaches. By giving voice to marginalised and silenced discourses, this article examines how a participatory approach to research affects the way in which participants view themselves, and the implications of such strategies for a broader understanding of movements for social change.

Applying feminist research approaches to social-change practice

Although traditional social-science research methods have provided insights into how individuals relate and communicate, these approaches suffer from significant limitations.

Such research is guided by the motivations of the research 'expert', and participants are required only to provide the information solicited in the form of interview queries or structured survey questions. During this information-extraction phase, the participants may at best be briefed about the objectives and consequences of the study. Rarely are they given the opportunity to discuss the implications of the research exercise with the researcher or with other participants.

In contrast, feminist scholars have argued that neutrality and objectivity are neither possible nor desirable in research (Ghorashi 2005; Jackson 2006). They critique the hierarchal power distance between researcher and participant, a lack of attention to indigenous knowledge, and the absence of any interaction or dialogue among participants (Fraser 1989). Feminist scholars contend that traditional research methods in the social sciences reinforce the *status quo*, reifying masculine ways of knowing and being, and suppressing the feminine (Hooks 1994).

One major conceptual link between feminism and communication is the importance of *giving voice* to those who are traditionally marginalised, silenced, and ignored. When engaging in participatory sketching or photography, participants express themselves in more than words (Singhal and Devi 2003; Singhal *et al.* 2007; Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006; Singhal and Rogers 1999). Further, by narrating and presenting these images in public, voices emerge that might not have otherwise surfaced. As Freire (1970) argued, self-discovery and the opportunity to express a view that resists societal norms are essential in order to create critical consciousness and liberate oneself from oppressive bonds.

Feminist methods support social and political change, lending themselves to the reframing of ideas through discussion and debate (Ghorashi 2005). Feminist traditions recognise the inherent power differentials that characterise relationships and they advocate reducing such differentials in the production of knowledge (Gatenby and Humphries 2000). Feminist approaches emphasise that the 'political' orientation of the researcher undoubtedly influences the research practices, and should be recognised as a powerful force (Ghorashi 2005). Further, feminist perspectives of communication view the role of dialogue as being central to building community and promoting social change (Wang 1999). Such an approach demands that we problematise issues such as ethnicity and gender, issues that are closely intertwined with human rights (Scott *et al.* 2002).

The feminist viewpoint also illuminates the therapeutic value of drawing and storytelling – that is, encouraging forms of self-expression that are rejected in traditional research practices, where the means of producing knowledge are codified in print, and controlled by the researcher (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006). Western regimes of knowledge production privilege the verbal and the written word (Conquergood 2002). In Belize, the Garifuna people use the word *gapencillitin* (literally 'people with pencil') to refer to the educated, literate, and powerful individuals, and the term *mapencillitin* (literally 'people without pencil') to refer to the uneducated, rural, and working class. Here, the pencil, as an instrument of literacy, draws the line between the haves and have-nots (Conquergood 2002). A feminist viewpoint questions the hegemony of printed knowledge, arguing for the recognition of other forms of expression. By providing participants with the tools for producing knowledge, such as markers and cameras, and by providing opportunities for public performance of their narratives, feminist approaches enhance individual agency and solidarity (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Wang 1999).

Valuing emotionality

A discussion of the feminist orientation must address the role of emotionality in our lives. While a traditional survey questionnaire taps into the conscious, analytic elements of experience and

understanding, feminist approaches go beyond. Standard social-science methodologies tend to view emotion as unscientific. While emotion has been traditionally viewed as a state of 'lack of control', and most strongly associated with the female sex, participatory methods insist that emotions play an important role in understanding individuals and cultures. As such, participatory methods directly support the notion that emotion clarifies rather than clouds understanding and judgment. By handing over the means of production to the participants, participatory methods not only give value to freedom of voice but also create a space for expression that goes beyond the rational, allowing for the emotive to surface and be valued.

In participatory research activities, participants engage on an individual level by creating a sketch or snapping a photograph. However, this individual activity is brought into the larger community – that is, publicly performed – in a variety of ways, including the discussion that precedes picture taking; narration of the photo in front of others; and community discussions that occur afterwards. The public performance of emotions including anger, fear, shame, joy, and hope creates trust among group members, illuminating the importance of different points of view (Dullea 2006; Ghorashi 2005). Participatory activities can cause some initial discomfort, especially when participants are unaccustomed to expressing their opinions, believing that they have nothing of value to share. However, these initial negative self-judgments are usually overcome as supportive interactions ensue (Page and Scott 2001). Because the expression of emotions allows an intimate connection not only between the self and the subject, but also among participants, emotional relations lead to stronger group cohesion. For instance, studies of cancer patients attending group support sessions show that being able to relate to those who are experiencing similar lived realities effectively allows for improved social and emotional function.

Community through connections

Feminist traditions value the need to create a sense of community, particularly among women, by emphasising connection rather than a more dominant, individualistic perspective (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Wang 1999). Participants must feel empowered to express their views without fear of retribution or shame, thus spurring group dialogue on difficult issues (Dullea 2006; Ghorashi 2005; Mann 2002; Sherman 2005). Participatory photography, while performed individually, often involves the participation of other members of the community who allow themselves to be photographed. Bringing a camera into a community where many may not have seen one before leads to curiosity and wonderment. Community members may want to know how it works, and whether they may look through the viewfinder. The camera, by itself, becomes a means to enable discussion before the photographs are taken, developed, and subsequently narrated. Once the photographs are available, they are publicly displayed and/or performed, becoming fodder for comment and debate. The experience is one of emerging discussions, interactions, and encounters.

Self-development and collective development through participation

A feminist methodological orientation stresses continued self- and collective development as central to any research approach. By becoming a participant, one allows oneself to become an integral part of an interactive process (Dullea 2006). By actively engaging with others, participants are likely to learn things about themselves and gain new insights on life around them. For example, when placed in a group setting, a participant might acknowledge her initial fear in participating but may add that after being with others she has a new-found confidence and would like to engage in the activity again. Participants are likely to become more critically

conscious about the world around them, listening to the different perspectives expressed by other group members. Participants may also develop practical skills, such as group facilitation and public speaking, as well as technical skills such as how to use a camera (Side 2005). By acquiring such skills, and becoming an active participant within a group setting, an individual gains in self-esteem and pride (*ibid.*). She feels agency to do things that she may not have tried before at an individual level, or collectively with others.

From our discussion above it is clear that participatory research methods speak to and embody feminist orientations of emotionality, connections, and community, and holistic development of the self and the collective. Accordingly, we posed three research questions to reveal the feminist orientation of participatory methods, drawing upon our participants' view of social-change practices in the Peruvian Amazon. How does a participatory reading of Minga Perú's social-change practices speak to, and embody

- the feminist value of expressing emotionality among participants?
- the feminist imperative of creating connections and a sense of community among participants?
- the feminist emphasis on engaging participants to foster holistic development of the self and the collective?

Research setting and data collection

The setting

Within the Peruvian Amazon, rich with natural beauty and home to diverse indigenous cultures, there are grave concerns about social and health matters (Elías 2002). One of the most serious is the lack of access to health care due to the region's topography. With no developed roads, the Amazon River remains the only viable means of transport. Reaching a medical outpost sometimes requires several days of travel via self-paddled canoe, motorised boats, or passenger ferries. Such a journey is hazardous when women suffer pregnancy complications. In certain riverine communities, especially those inhabited by the Huambisa, Aguajun, and Shipibo-Conibo ethnic groups, women may bear on average 10 children (three times the national average), lose one or two children to disease, perhaps contract a sexually transmitted infection, and die before reaching the age of 50 (22 years less than the national average) (Bustamente 2004).

Another matter for concern is gender inequity. The patriarchal social system calls for women to be subservient to men, to have little if any education, and to have little say on issues that affect their welfare (for instance, the number of children that they bear). They are frequent victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and teen pregnancy.

To address the health and gender issues, the NGO Minga Perú works in the Region of Loreto, a territory comprising a quarter of Peru's geographic area, including 146,000 square miles of the Amazon rainforest.³ About one million people, comprising 65 ethno-linguistic groups, make up the Loreto region. By promoting reproductive health, gender equality, and income-generating activities in a region that suffers geographical isolation, poverty, disease, and patriarchal traditions, Minga seeks to offer dignity and hope to Loreto's people (Elías 2002).

Participatory data collection

The participatory research described in this article was undertaken by the two authors at two separate periods. The first data-collection activity, which included a participatory photography exercise, was conducted in September 2003. The second data set, which included a participatory

sketching exercise, was conducted during March 2005. Both research activities were largely carried out at the *Tambo*, Minga's training centre in Nauta. Women come together at the *Tambo* to share experiences and to learn new skills such as sewing and crocheting.

Disposable cameras were handed out to seven of Minga's community *promotoras*, encouraging these women to capture in photographs the reality of Amazonian life, including their perceptions of Minga's influence on their communities. Rather than expecting the *promotoras* to respond to questions, and thereby constraining the nature and scope of their verbal responses, researchers asked them to capture Minga's influence on their community through images. None of the seven *promotoras* had previously handled a camera. They were given two weeks to take pictures. Our 'shoot back' invitation to the seven *promotoras*, who came from four different riverine communities, yielded a total of 107 photographs. After developing these pictures, the first author took the pictures back to each of the seven *promotoras*, asking them to narrate the meaning of the pictures. These narratives, often performed in front of others, were recorded and subsequently translated and transcribed from Spanish to English.

The 23 women participants (all *promotoras*) in the March 2005 participatory sketching activity were given coloured pencils, markers, and plain paper, and were asked to answer several broad-based questions – once again, not in words but with sketches. The questions posed included: What has been the significance of the radio programme *¡Bienvenida Salud!* in your personal and family life? How was your community before you became a Minga *promotora*, and how is it nowadays? This activity yielded about 75 sketches, after which each participant publicly narrated what her sketch was about, what it meant to her, and how it answered the question that had been posed. These narratives, captured by a translator, were later transcribed.

Results

Here we provide answers to our three original research questions, drawing upon the 107 photographs, 75 sketches, and accompanying narratives about Minga Perú's social-change practices in the Peruvian Amazon.

Expressing emotionality

When engaging in participatory activities, Minga's *promotoras* frequently discussed how feelings of sadness, shame, or lack of self-esteem had been part of their past identity. Mari, a woman in her thirties, noted: *'Before knowing Minga (Perú) we were violent, we would quarrel and the kids would hear us and grow up just like us, with psychological violence. Here we are now dialoguing with our neighbours, with our children.'* Adela, also in her thirties, revealed her emotional past by noting: *'Now I don't become enraged any more, I no longer mistreat my children. Before, I was shy. I felt embarrassed because I didn't have any schooling, but then I came to realise that we are all the same. I don't feel ashamed any more. I am not embarrassed about where I come from.'*

These moments would probably not have emerged in a traditional survey interview. Coping with doubt, anger, and embarrassment is clearly a difficult proposition for women who, for most of their lives, have been denied freedom of expression. In a less interactive and connected environment, admitting to child abuse or to feeling ashamed could be devastating for the individual and her family. However, in the presence of other women who share equally powerful emotions and convictions, it is possible to create a strong sense of unity and belonging. This emotional connection is at the heart of a feminist approach to research. By expressing

themselves honestly and openly, these women are better able to connect to one another and share the trials and triumphs that are part of their lived realities.

While a multitude of emotions, both positive and negative, are clearly expressed during discussions about sketches and photos, the issue of self-esteem came up repeatedly. Typical is the case of Mercedita, a young mother:

Before, I was very thin and confined to the home. I was all ashamed. I wore a skirt. Now it has changed. Coming to the workshops I have learned that women are not worthy only for the house, they can take part in meetings. I am not angry any more and now I have gained weight. The programme has helped us with every type of violence. Now we are eating and drinking with our children and that is happiness, this why we gain weight.

Another participant, Evarina, drew a sketch of herself and described the changes in her life in equally emotional terms. *'Now I don't care about my clothes or if I am ugly. What I care about is my way of being a person. I've thrown off my shame and fears.'*

While a more conventional methodological orientation might interpret such statements as simply individual opinions, these responses go beyond the realm of mere opinion. The creative nature of photography and sketching allows for more personal input and decision making on the part of the participant. By determining what will and will not be displayed, the participants make choices about how to express themselves, including how much personal detail to include in both their artwork and their narratives. As such, they are able to use emotions both to identify with others and to understand themselves better.

Creating community

Feminist approaches attach importance to community building, especially among the marginalised. The feminist orientation emphasises that while an individual can alter his or her attitude or behaviour about a practice or belief, it is in groups that movements for social change gain power. As discussed earlier, photography and sketching are intrinsically communicative practices which engender discussion and debate. In such debate lies the potential for community building and reconstruction. This is particularly relevant in the Peruvian Amazon, where women are shy to engage in public forums due to a lack of education or low self-esteem. Participatory approaches to research can help to reverse these power relations, as Emira described:

In earlier times my community was disorganised and only men attended the meetings. Some women listened to what took place in the meetings, but secretly because their husbands would argue with them if they found out. [In this sketch] we can see some women listening outside the meeting. There was too much chauvinism and men thought that representing ourselves meant that we were too forward. Nowadays, women are organised; they participate and invite women and men [to meetings]. They share housework [with their husbands].

While the narratives of our participants were wide-ranging, a dominant theme was domestic violence – a taboo topic, but women were not just discussing it, but making collective decisions about how to eliminate it from their homes. Zarela described her colourful sketch: *'Here I am with my husband. We have had a fight and he has beaten me. [Now] here we are both together. Before, we didn't hold hands, but since the programme began, we don't fight any more.'* Adela added an example of her own experience, confiding:

There are children and adolescents [washing dishes alongside the river] and there I am. We're talking about what violence is, trying to discuss it, since sometimes one of the

mothers is a victim of abuse. And that's what I'm telling them, reminding them that in this [modern] time we do not need to endure abuse; also we need to eliminate violence quickly... While we wash, we talk.

Allowing community members, especially the health *promotoras*, to view the positive social changes that they have helped to initiate validates their role as engaged members of their village. The power of this talk should not be discounted. As Juana pointed out, '*it is empowering to see the potential that exists within even a small group of people*'.

Individually and collectively developing through participation

While the feminist orientation emphasises the value of creating community, such a position also places a premium upon the development of self through critical consciousness. In conjunction with this sentiment, a participatory research approach requires individuals to evaluate their experiences and make connections that might not surface during a structured survey interview. Participants reflect on their drawings and photos to gain in-depth insights and then share their experiences in public. Further, by listening to, and engaging with, the narratives of other group members, the women learn more about themselves and their community. Lourdes, a woman in her early thirties, describes her experience with photography: '*It was very interesting, largely because it helped us, just like drawing pictures helps us. It helped us see our community, it helped us see just how much we are learning from Minga Perú, and how we are different. I think it worked very well, this work we did.*'

What Lourdes is emphasising is that the participatory photography exercise allowed her and her fellow health promoters collectively to appreciate the many improvements that they have helped to implement in their communities, in conjunction with their friends and neighbours. While these changes may well have occurred even if the participatory research exercise had not been undertaken, it is unlikely that the women would have had the opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments with such collective pride and in such a tangible manner.

Discussion and conclusions

Our research in the Peruvian Amazon suggests that participant-centred research approaches can produce valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals and communities. By empowering marginalised individuals and communities, participant-oriented approaches allow for multiple perspectives, critical reflection, and personal and community growth.

Further, while it is clear that participatory research processes are closely aligned with feminist sensibilities and provide alternative worldviews different from what traditional survey-based social-science research methodologies can offer, their greatest potential lies in their purposive use in social-change movements. In contrast to large-scale, campaign-style approaches to changing individual attitudes and behaviours, participatory methods – such as sketching and photography – allow individuals and communities to own both their social problems and the solutions that they hope to construct. Participatory research methods can offer opportunities for raising critical consciousness among individuals and communities about societal realities, as another Peruvian example from a previous decade illustrates.

In 1973 in a poor neighbourhood in Lima, the noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his team asked people questions in Spanish, but requested the answers in photographs. When the question '*What is exploitation?*' was asked, some people took photos of a landlord, a grocer, or a policeman (Boal 1979: 123). One child took a photo of a nail on a wall. It made no sense to adults, but other children were in strong agreement. The ensuing discussions

showed that many young boys of that neighbourhood worked in the shoeshine business. Their clients were mainly in the city, not in the *barrio* where they lived. As their shoeshine boxes were too heavy for them to carry, these boys rented a nail on a wall (usually in a shop), where they could hang their boxes for the night. To them, that nail on the wall represented 'exploitation'. The 'nail on the wall' photograph spurred widespread discussions in the *limeño* *barrio* about other forms of institutionalised exploitation, and ways to overcome those (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006).

From the perspective of social-change practice, participatory photography techniques (referred to as 'photo voice' or 'visual voices') provide an opportunity to bring to the fore alternative discourses, realities, and worldviews that were previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked. The narrative accompanying the visual becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, spurring community members to further reflect on, discuss, and analyse the issues that confront them (Lykes 1997; Wang 1999; Wang 2003). Such participatory approaches have been used in varied settings with diverse populations, including the hungry and homeless in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Wang 2003); poor, young, and homeless women in Detroit (Killion and Wang 2000); troubled youth in slums in Nairobi; and Maya Ixil women in the Guatemalan highlands who survived the civil war. Participatory photography allowed Mayan Ixil women collectively to develop a public record of their lives, reflect upon the debilitating effects of 30 years of internal war, and rebuild community (Lykes 1997).

In our study in the Peruvian Amazon, we also discovered the emancipatory and reflective dimensions of participatory photography and sketching. For instance, Mercedita, a Minga *promotora*, pointed out how taking photographs of her village helped her to see the progress that can be attributed to Minga's activities. Juana, another Minga *promotora*, noted:

It was wonderful to see the people of the community in the pictures, meeting together, listening to the radio programme, coming to learn more about a social topic, asking us 'what is that?'... The camera let us see for ourselves the kind of work we're doing in the community, and what else needs to be done.

It is important to note, however, that participatory research methods are not free of risks. For instance, emotionality can potentially lead to heightened anger, shame, and resentment on the part of marginalised individuals (Mann 2002), although our research seems to suggest that when groups are able to create a comfortable and 'safe' space in which to interact, emotions become a positive means of interaction.

One should also acknowledge that participatory research methods require extensive time and energy on the part of both researcher and participant, in addition to the extra time required to develop relationships and gain trust. The process also requires the researcher to resist taking on the role of expert, accepting instead the role of co-learner, a power reversal that may not come easily. However, while participatory strategies retain certain limitations, our research seems to suggest that they merit the effort. As Chambers noted about participatory research approaches:

Conditions are not always right. But when they are, local people, and especially the poorer, enjoy the creative learning that comes from presenting their knowledge and their reality. They gain confidence, finding that they can do things they did not know they could, showing and analyzing their complex realities. Things are then seen together and differently. It is not just that local people share knowledge with outsiders. They themselves learn more of what they know, and together present and build up more than anyone knew alone. It is not the reality of the outsider which is transferred and imposed, but theirs which is expressed, built up, and shared, and their confidence and

capabilities which are strengthened. In a practical way, it is the reality of local people that comes to count. (Chambers 1997: 156)

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Notes

1. Minga Perú started its work in the Peruvian Amazon in collaboration with the Amazonian Peoples Resources Initiative (APRI) of the University of Kansas. Currently, Minga works independently of APRI. Minga's work is supported by the Ford Foundation, the American Jewish World Service, AVINA Foundation, Empower, Moriah Fund, and Match International.
2. Community health promoters are selected by their community according to their level of leadership, commitment to others, and desire to learn. As a result, the position is regarded as one with a high level of responsibility. While women in this patriarchal society have traditionally been denied access to positions of power, the establishment of community health promoters who are women has served to alter this balance.
3. Minga's present work in the Peruvian Amazon is focused in the Marañon and El Tigre river basins, both major tributaries of the Amazon and accessible from Iquitos City, where Minga has its headquarters.

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