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The transformative and emancipatory potential of participatory evaluation: reflections from a participatory action research study with war-affected young mothers

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ABSTRACT

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) study with Young Mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda which took place from 2006 to 2009 aimed to understand what 'reintegration' meant to young mothers formerly associated with armed groups. It also implemented social action initiatives designed by study participants to promote their wellbeing and achieve reintegration. We evaluated the study using multiple participatory evaluation methods, situating evaluation as part of the cycle of research and action. This approach facilitated young mothers' participation in developing the criteria by which the study and its reintegration outcomes would be judged. We describe each method and what we uniquely learned from using a participatory evaluation approach. We discuss how this approach is well-suited for complex studies, can enhance data quality, increases capacity of all involved in the evaluation and supports the critical reflexivity necessary for participatory studies to succeed.

Introduction

Participatory research has been used in fields as diverse as education, psychology, public health and international development for the past four decades. While there is no consensus definition of participatory research, Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) have argued that the primary difference between more traditional research and participatory research 'lies not in methods, but in the attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted' (p. 1667).

Evaluation is one component of the research process. While it has sometimes been conceptualized as a 'one-off activity at the end of a project,' it can also be seen as an integral part of the knowledge creation process (Newman, 2008, p. 385). Participatory evaluation, as a non-distinct subset of participatory research, has a long history, particularly in the international development context. Chouinard and Cousins (2015) define participatory evaluation as a 'partnership between trained evaluation specialists and program community members in the co-production of evaluative knowledge about specific programs or interventions of interest (e.g. projects or policies)' (p. 6). Thus, participatory interventions or research can be evaluated using non-participatory methods, participatory evaluation can

produce knowledge about non-participatory interventions or research, or participatory evaluation can be used to produce knowledge about participatory interventions or research.

Starting in the late 1990s, international organizations such as the World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank have promoted participation in evaluation, yet there remain few published examples of participatory evaluation (OESP, 1997; Rietbergen-McCracken & Narayan, 1998; Springett & Wallerstein, 2008; UNICEF Evaluation Office, 2002). In their systematic review of 121 participatory evaluation studies, Cousins and Chouinard found only 21 in the development context, and only six of these in Africa; one was from a post-conflict context (2013).

Much recent scholarship on participatory research and evaluation comes from the United States, where Community-Based Participatory Research, especially in the public health field, has grown through the increased support for community-University partnerships to reduce health disparities for marginalized populations (Harris et al., 2018; Hicks et al., 2012). Researchers have argued that participatory evaluation 'enhances scientific validity, producing richer and more accurate data; creates active support for the results of the process of inquiry; and therefore creates greater commitment to change as well as a greater likelihood that ideas will be diffused and used' (Springett & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 204). Participatory evaluation is also thought to be empowering for participants and to lead to a greater likelihood of improvements in programs and services, particularly to address health disparities, than traditional evaluation (Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

Among the disadvantages of participatory evaluation are that it often requires more time and training resources, it can be viewed as less objective because those with a stake in the outcomes participate in the evaluation, and the quality may be less rigorous when it comes to technical aspects as there may not be sufficient community expertise (USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1996). As many funding agencies require pre-specification of indicators and evaluation processes in proposals, more participatory evaluation approaches can be challenging to fund.

Chouinard and Cousins have argued that the 'cultural, social, political, and economic complexity across context, as well as the on-going history of donor-recipient relationships in much of the developing world' mean that conducting participatory evaluation in this context is significantly different from conducting participatory evaluation in even highly diverse contexts in Western countries (2015, p. 17). We draw from the literature discussing participatory evaluation in both development and Western contexts, finding that our work is in conversation with emerging constructs in participatory research and evaluation in the Western context – like complexity and reflexivity (c.f. Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Muhammad et al., 2015) – and extends the ongoing conversation about data quality that is particularly salient in the development context (c.f. Ferme, 1998).

The present article describes a multi-method participatory evaluation of a participatory action research (PAR) study that took place from 2006 to 2009 in three post-conflict African countries: Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda. The purpose of the study was to learn from young mothers who had been associated with fighting forces or armed opposition groups (i.e. child soldiers) what reintegration meant to them and to implement social actions within the context of their communities that would help them achieve reintegration. We have written extensively about this study, including a general report of the study procedure and findings (McKay, Veale, Worthen, & Wessells, 2011); a discussion of the role of relationships within the study (Veale, Worthen, & McKay, 2017a, 2017b); how participation was viewed and used as both a principle and a tool of social reintegration within the study (Veale, McKay, Worthen, & Wessells, 2013) and our observations about empowerment and rights of young war-affected mothers as a facet of their experience of reintegration (Worthen, Veale, McKay, & Wessells, 2010). The present article focuses specifically on the evaluation of the study, which occurred throughout the study, used multiple methods, and which we conceptualized as part of the transformative and emancipatory work of the overall participatory action research study.

Background to the PAR study

The need for this study emerged from an international conference on girl child soldiers. At that conference, researchers, national and international staff of child protection agencies, and representatives of UN agencies and major funding bodies, identified young mothers and their children as particularly at risk as few programs were focused on serving their particular needs (McKay, Burman, Gonsalves, & Worthen, 2004). Among the recommendations from this conference were increasing community-based reintegration efforts and understanding the experiences of these girls and young women through research (Robinson & McKay, 2005).

The subsequent participatory action research study on young mothers formerly associated with fighting forces and armed groups (the PAR) employed a partnership approach between academics and child protection agencies. The initial implementation team consisted of representatives of 10 child protection agencies and four Western academics who, per Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) description of the participatory researcher as 'facilitator or catalyst' rather than 'director,' we called the PAR organizers (p. 1670). One year into the project, three locally based African academics joined the collaboration. The extension of the research team was intended to increase regional capacity for participatory research, as well as increase the diversity of perspectives and expertise to enhance the overall team. This approach created additional 'space between' – a concept that better captures the multi-dimensional aspects of knowledge, power, and status difference than the dichotomous insider/outside construct – and offered to the PAR collective additional interpretive and critical perspectives, as well as opportunities for co-learning (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Muhammad et al., 2015).

Each of the partner agencies implemented the PAR in two field sites, ranging from remote villages to urban centers, bringing together groups of young mother participants, their children and community advisors to work together over several years to assess and improve young mothers' reintegration. In all, over 658 young mothers were study participants; two-thirds of participants were formerly associated with fighting forces or armed groups, while a third were identified as otherwise vulnerable by their communities. Eighty percent of participants were between the ages of 16–24 with most under the age of 18 when they became pregnant.

During the three years of the study, young mothers groups engaged in a cyclical process of data collection, analysis, social action implementation, reflection, planning and evaluation all aimed at social change and transformation. Young mothers used group discussions, role-play, improvised songs, as well as individual interviews to deepen their understanding of their experience during and after the war, with a focus on what reintegration has meant to them. They analyzed the data through group discussions, sharing what they learned and identifying common themes and challenges. They then designed social actions to mitigate the problems they identified. For example, to address the problem of having insufficient livelihoods to support themselves and their children the young mothers in some sites developed micro-credit groups to initiate small businesses (petty trading, soap making, baking, etc.). In other sites, young mothers requested, and were given, a communal plot of land to develop and cultivate. To address the problem of stigma and marginalization, many young mothers groups created dramas that they performed for the broader community, explaining what their lives had been like during and after the war. These dramas often brought communities closer and cultivated support for the young mothers' reintegration. These initiatives were developed, assessed, modified, tried again and reflected on in a continual cycle throughout the PAR.

The study launched with a weeklong, retreat style meeting for the representatives of the agency partners and the academics, which we refer to as the 'study team.' This meeting provided an opportunity for training, knowledge exchange, role-playing, trouble-shooting, brainstorming, and, perhaps most importantly, trust building. We frequently met in groups of 'country teams' to discuss the particular challenges and strengths that we might encounter in each country. We also agreed upon 'Do No Harm' principles (Table 1). These principles were arrived at through a consensus-based process, and were reviewed and amended annually at subsequent team meetings.

Table 1. Do no harm principles.

1. Code of conduct
2. No research without action
3. 'If it doesn't come from the participants, it's not PAR'
4. Manage expectations
5. Avoid excessive targeting
6. Informed consent
7. Confidentiality
8. Ethical interviewing
9. IRB review and local consultation
10. Shared ownership of data and principled dissemination

The principle of 'No research without action' was meant to help us all remember that the study was limited in scope. While gaining knowledge in itself might be valuable, in the context of doing the PAR, we wanted to be sure that we were not engaged in research just for research's sake but with the objective of leading to action and transformation. This led to the articulation of the next principle, 'If it doesn't come from the participants, it's not PAR.' This principle served as a reminder that the premise of this study was that the young mothers were the experts in their own experiences and that we should learn from them about their priorities. While we knew that we might encounter additional topics to study or mobilize a community to change, the process relied upon the young women trusting that their voices would be heard. Especially, given the context of tremendous social exclusion and marginalization, we felt that, as the project staff, we had a primary responsibility to model respectful engagement with the young mothers.

The principle of managing expectations emerged out of the recognition that, in a context of tremendous need, there can be a tendency to want to make promises that are unrealistic. This, in turn, leads to a breakdown of trust when promises are not kept. We decided to avoid 'excessive targeting' based on the conversations that were taking place at the time among experts developing the UNICEF Paris Principles (2007). Published the following year, these principles recommend an 'inclusive approach to reintegration,' specifically the inclusion of 'other vulnerable children' aside from those recruited or used by armed forces or groups in community-based programming. In the context of this study, we realized that if marginalization was one of the problems we were trying to address, singling out young mothers who had been formerly associated with armed groups or fighting forces for participation in the PAR could lead to further stigma. Instead, we broadened the PAR to include other vulnerable young mothers. Each community decided what 'vulnerable' meant in their community, using an approach we came to call 'Let a thousand flowers bloom.' This concept meant that we actively cultivated diverse approaches and experimentation in this aspect of the study and many others. Thus, in some field sites including 'vulnerable' meant young mothers with disabilities, while for others it meant economically precarious, single young mothers.

Informed consent, confidentiality, ethical interviewing and IRB approval with local consultation are all components of best research practice. In the context of our study, this meant all team members undertook to integrate these practices fully into all aspects of the PAR. For example, while 'informed consent' can be thought of as a transactional process whereby a researcher offers a potential subject information and the subject signs a paper, we emphasized the importance of taking the time to ensure that participants fully understood the study and were interested in participating and not coerced. In some communities, this process took several weeks or months to complete, as research assistants met several times with potential participants individually, in small groups, and with their families. Only when participants fully understood the study and wanted to participate were they read the consent document in their own language and asked to sign the document.

This study included many participants who were under the age of 18. In our IRB documents, we noted that we would identify local laws and customs about who is a minor and/or entitled to make decisions. In many contexts, becoming a mother confers decision-making power as an adult,

even if a mother is below the age of 18. While we developed procedures to gain consent of a parent or guardian, where appropriate, we made no other distinction between young mothers below or above the age of 18 during the PAR or its evaluation.

As the study progressed, we realized the need for a statement of principles around the ownership and dissemination of data. We identified 17 principles to guide professional writing, presentations, dissemination and linkages to other research (see Appendix 1). In addition, we articulated the goal, strategy and ethical principles involved with dissemination of study material and findings at the local, national, regional and international level. At the heart of this process was the principle that the young mother participants owned their data and, as a group, they had authority to determine which data were shared and how those data should be shared.

Participatory evaluation process

In keeping with our 'do no harm' principles, we were committed to using evaluation methods that were both rigorous and participatory. With the support of our funding bodies, our study team viewed evaluation as an integral part of the research process, allowing for information sharing and learning within a time frame that permitted adaptation of the intervention study. This contrasts with the commonly held view of evaluation as a tool for reporting, auditing and accountability (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015).

We understood there to be a continuum of evaluation approaches available, from having all evaluation 'come from the girls' (pure PAR) to academic-driven evaluation (outsider-driven). We viewed this as a tension to be negotiated through dialogue with the study participants and agency partners, and within the team of Western and African academics, rather than as a single decision to be made. Rather than create multiple levels of evaluation that did not interact with each other, we aimed for a rich, fluid and dynamic approach that involved co-learning and having the participants' priorities drive or feature prominently in any academic-led components of data collection and evaluation. We did not want the evaluation of the PAR to put the academics 'on high' and relegate the participants to a lower status. The evaluation process itself was designed to contribute to the young mothers' agency. Yet we also saw a need for rigor so that the data gathered and knowledge obtained through the study would be valid and reliable and could be in dialogue with the more traditional literature about reintegration of former child soldiers.

To meet these demands, we developed multiple evaluation methods that we employed at different stages of the PAR and throughout the process (Table 2). The methods occupied various places on the pure PAR to outsider-driven continuum, yet all were approached with a regard for 'people as agents rather than objects; capable of analyzing their own situations and designing their own solutions' (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1670). The following section describes each of these methods in detail.

Process evaluation

The first evaluation method we employed was aimed at documenting the PAR process and evaluating how participatory the process was. Organizers, project staff, community members and young mothers developed indicators to measure the extent of participation. These indicators shed light on the level and types of participation during a time that the PAR was emerging and young mothers were developing their objectives for actions to improve their reintegration status. While the indicators captured both qualitative and quantitative information, PAR organizers analyzed these data qualitatively and used them to provide quick feedback to partners.

Examples of process indicators are as follows:

(1) How many young mothers are regularly attending meetings?
(2) Do participants say they find the PAR useful?
(3) When asked, what do participants say they are getting out of the PAR?

Table 2. Evaluation methods.

Method	Description and purpose	Timing	Who collected the data?
Process evaluation	Indicators developed by organizers, project staff, community members and participants to understand the process of the study and level and type of participation.	Throughout the study, but especially useful in the first year.	Agency staff, community advisory committee members, young mother participants.
PAR team meetings	Annual 3-day meeting of young mother participants, project staff, organizers, funders, and governmental and UNICEF representatives to engage in evaluative conversation, data sharing between and among PAR actors and co-learning.	Annually during the study.	Meeting agendas were drafted by PAR organizers and modified during the meeting. The full meeting and breakout sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic and summary reports were created by the lead organizer.
Countrywide young mothers' meetings	A meeting of young mother representatives from each field site in the country to share and collectively analyze data. Meetings provided lateral co-learning opportunities, supported young mothers' in analyzing their own primary data, and created a pipeline for data to be shared to the PAR organizers.	Bi-monthly in the final year of the study.	Meetings were facilitated by local academic partners and/or agency staff and attended by young mother participants representing each field site. Data were brought to the meeting by young mother participants and analyzed collectively.
Ethnographic fieldwork	Visits by PAR organizers to field sites to observe and document the experiences and perspectives of participants, community members, and other stakeholders.	Intermittently through the study and 6 months after the end of the study.	PAR organizers collected data through conversations, focus groups, participant observation, photographs, videos and audio recordings.
Participatory outcome indicators	Indicators developed by participants in a participatory manner, facilitated by agency staff and academic partners. These indicators yielded qualitative and quantitative information about the study outcomes.	Final year of the study.	Young mother participants, agency staff, country-based academicsand Western academics.

We collected these data through monthly field reports written by field site coordinators or by young mothers themselves. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, we used a form developed by the PAR organizers with feedback from agency partners to solicit examples of and impressions about the month's activities (See Appendix 2). PAR organizers also gathered process data during initial field visits through conversations with participants, community members and study staff. During these conversations, we asked open-ended questions that allowed participants to reflect on what they enjoyed about the PAR and what they found challenging. These open-ended questions often yielded unexpected results that shed light on the process of the PAR. For example, in one study site a few months into the study, participants shared that they had begun cooking meals together and as they cooked meals, they shared their stories. It emerged that while they had official 'meetings' once a week, they were actually gathering as a group every day, as they found it pleasurable to conduct their daily tasks together. Another unexpected finding elicited through the process evaluation was that in one field site, elderly women were wanting to join the group. According to the monthly report, these older women observed that the young women in the group were having a good experience with micro-credit and group agriculture and wanted to participate as well.

These two examples illustrate how the process evaluation could provide depth to our understanding of how things were working in the field, as well as surface and clarify unintended consequences. As researchers coordinating across multiple field sites and countries, the two examples above said much about participants' self-perception of the usefulness of meeting as a group, and the community's response to the group. Through the first example, we learned that participants themselves found gathering in a peer group so helpful that they gathered themselves. Through the second example, we learned that community members viewed the group as helpful

and that the stigma surrounding the participants had been reduced to such a degree that other members of the community wished to join their group. The latter example also was an early red flag about how others in the community could become jealous of the participants.

These data were used for several purposes. Importantly, we used these data to communicate with PAR funders about the status of the PAR and advocate for additional funding to support activities. As PAR organizers, we used these data to discuss similarities and differences across field sites and countries, and to make recommendations to increase participation, using examples from field sites that were flourishing to support those that were struggling. Finally, we shared back findings with partner agencies, supporting them with data to make their own connections and contrasts between what they observed happening in their agency's field sites and what the organizers reported happening in other sites.

PAR team meetings

At the end of each year of the PAR, we held a conference for PAR stakeholders. Conference participants included eight young mother study participants (four from Uganda, where the conferences were held, and two each from Liberia and Sierra Leone), study coordinators from each agency, academic partners, representatives of the funding agencies, members of government from each country, and UNICEF representatives. These 3-day meetings were aimed at sharing data between and among PAR actors and learning from the variation in each field site. We used these opportunities to review and revise our 'do no harm' principles and to hear from the young mother participants directly. Meetings also facilitated their direct co-learning across field sites. The conferences were a practice in participation: as organizers, we continually adapted the agenda to address rising concerns as these emerged from agency partners, government or UNICEF representatives, and young mother participants.

During the meetings, we engaged in evaluative conversation and reflection. Conference participants had different perspectives on the PAR based on their role in the study, field site and country. Each of these perspectives was shared, which produced a rich, sometimes tense, but always respectful conversation. The full meetings were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The written notes provided an additional source of data for evaluative analysis. These notes were both summarized and thematically analyzed for dissemination to conference participants.

In the 2008 PAR Team Meeting, for example, one topic that emerged was how to include men and boys into the work of the PAR study. Through a small group discussion that included young mother participants and study staff from each of the three countries, it emerged that in some sites, men were beginning to fear that the PAR groups were undermining their authority within their family and their roles in their communities. In some field sites, young mother participants had invited their male partners to join them in order to increase transparency and to remove suspicion that the participants were lying to their male partners about what transpired in group meetings.

The full group then discussed a dilemma inherent in this work. The PAR emerged in part because of women's experiences of war in the context of patriarchal societies and international institutions' previous failures to address girls' and women's unique gendered experience of reintegration. The study itself, as with participatory methods generally, was intended to empower the young mother participants. The study, as it was achieving its desired effect, was increasing the social power, independence, confidence and capacity of the young mother participants. This put them at risk from male partners and other community members who had a continued stake in the subjugation of these young women. This issue was not resolved, but rather discussed openly with diverse opinions and experiences shared from each study site context. This type of praxis[1] conversation supported project staff and participants by providing an opportunity to think through these challenges so that when they encountered a problem in the field site related to changing power relations, they would have a more complete framework through which to view the interaction and provide support.

As with the process evaluation method, the PAR Team Meetings also provided feedback to PAR organizers on whether and how the PAR was progressing towards achieving its stated goals. For example, one participant shared that she thought that the community had changed its attitudes toward the participants, citing as evidence that in the recent local election, the candidate had sought the group's endorsement. Data like these helped us learn more about the shifts in community dynamics manifested through the study.

These approaches were participatory in how the data were generated and how the data were used. Data from process evaluation and from the PAR Team Meetings were rapidly shared back to PAR stakeholders, including funders, and agency and academic partners. While those who were present in the Team Meetings had an opportunity to learn from one another first-hand, we also rapidly shared transcripts and summary reports back to partner agencies and funders. The data were also shared with the young mother study participants through report-backs from the PAR Team Meetings by the young mother representatives to the meetings, as well as by agency representatives who shared findings back to the communities. We hypothesize that this inclusive, reflective approach to sharing data may have fostered more participation in the processes of the PAR by participants, community members and agency partners, as it actively modeled respect and privileging the voices and capacity of participants.

Countrywide young mothers' meetings

During our second annual Team Meeting in Uganda, we discussed our principle of 'shared ownership of data' and came to the realization that if data were collected by the young mothers and stored locally, we had no pipeline for sharing those data laterally across field sites or centrally to the academic partners or organizers. For example, in one field site in Uganda, young mothers took notes at every meeting and stored these notes in a lock box in a community advisory board member's home. There was no process for sharing these notes with the academic partners.

Recognizing the great value of peer-to-peer connection and sharing of information across field sites, we developed the structure of the countrywide young mothers' meetings, facilitated by the local academic partner in coordination with agency staff. These meetings were a venue for bringing data forward from the field site to the academics/organizers and sharing laterally across sites.

In each field site, group members elected two representatives to attend the countrywide young mothers' meeting. Representatives brought data from their field site – a song or story, pictures, or notes from a meeting – and shared experiences and information, collectively analyzed data and participated in training. Representation at these meetings rotated so that many young mothers in each field site had an opportunity to participate. The meeting locations rotated between the field sites, enabling participants to visit other sites and meet young mothers' in other parts of the country.

In addition to providing a mechanism for data to be shared more widely and analyzed collectively, these meetings provided young mothers the opportunity to learn from other mothers outside of their community, and to learn leadership and evaluation skills.

The meetings yielded data shared and discussed by the young mother participants in each country. For example, in one meeting in Sierra Leone in April 2008, participants from each field site shared that while they were enjoying increased acceptance by family and community, and were doing better economically, group members had started missing meetings. Participants identified potential reasons why members were skipping meetings and discussed several approaches to increasing attendance. For example, in one site, some participants had 'misappropriated funds' intended for a shared pool and were no longer attending meetings. The suggestions for how to increase attendance included rotating the meeting venue within the community so that some participants did not always have to walk greater distances, sending out notices of meetings

earlier, identifying clear rules for attendance and issuing fines for participants who did not repay loans on time regardless of whether they attended meetings.

Another example of how young mothers shared and collectively analyzed data emerged from a meeting in Liberia: young mothers from one field site brought a song that their group had created to communicate their experiences during the war to members of their community in an effort to reduce marginalization. At the countrywide meeting, these two young mothers sang the song and they discussed what the song meant, how they had used the song in their work, and what the results had been. The meeting facilitator documented this discussion and these data were disseminated to the PAR organizers.

Ethnographic fieldwork

PAR organizers (the Western academics) collected ethnographic data during each visit to the PAR field sites. Visits to each site occurred one to three times in the first year, and then one to two times annually. In addition, 6 months after completing field operations, trips were made to 3 representative field sites in each country. Thus, we engaged in what Jeffrey and Troman have termed 'selective intermittent' ethnography (2004), where the study was over a long period of time, but the time in the field was intermittent.

During each trip, organizers took detailed notes, photographs, and audio and video recordings during group meetings and interviews with participants, community members and other stakeholders. We also observed the community contexts in each field site, deepening our understanding of the context in which the study participants lived. During the ethnographic field visits after the end of study operations, we held focus groups with participant and non-participant mothers, community advisors and community members at three field sites in each country and conducted individual interviews with additional stakeholders and participants. All audio and many video recordings were transcribed.

At the end of the study, PAR organizers held a retreat for several days to examine the ethnographic data and come to a consensus on key findings from these data. Using a grounded analytical approach, one of the organizers then further analyzed the data to identify important themes and subthemes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We then disseminated a draft report of the ethnographic findings to agency field staff, who shared it with PAR participants to engage in discussion. Reflections and revisions from these discussions were then incorporated into a second draft. This second draft was then shared with international child protection experts for their review and feedback.

While ethnography itself is not necessarily a participatory method, we used ethnography in a participatory and dialogic manner. During data collection, we often asked participants to show us what they thought was worth documenting. PAR organizers also discussed observations informally while in the field – with each other and with agency and community partners over long evenings of reflection, in bumpy car rides from one site to another, and in team meetings at the end of a visit. Finally, we conducted participatory analysis of the ethnographic data. We used these data in a participatory manner to check the validity and importance of findings, collaboratively analyzing these data and sharing drafts with PAR agency partners and study participants, as well as international experts in the field. In this manner, ethnography was the data collection method, but also a tool to foster participatory dialogue and enhance buy-in by various actors.

Participatory outcome indicators

During the final year of the PAR, we collaboratively developed a survey to evaluate the project and its outcomes systematically. Young mothers, community advisors, agency staff, local and Western academics, and funders all contributed to the survey development. As academics, we felt strongly that we needed at least one method where we obtained information from every participant in the study. Each of the evaluations methods we had employed until that point had the potential for not

surfacing the experiences of outliers in the study, particularly those whose experiences may have been more challenging.

Yet we were also cautious about using a quantitative survey tool in the context of our study. This unease stemmed first from our understanding of the politics of quantitative data collection and second, our concern about potential unreliability of the data obtained. To the first point, writing about Sierra Leone, Ferme (1998) has argued that while quantification may look technical, given the colonial and post-colonial use of quantification, enumeration itself is contestatory and disciplinary, reminiscent of 'political acts aimed at exposing and controlling people' (p. 565). In the context of a study where we were aiming explicitly for emancipation, we were squeamish about triggering concerns about how information would be extracted and used.

To the second point, conversations with colleagues and our own experience of data unreliability in the first 2 years of the study made us worry that a purely quantitative tool, however participatorily designed, would not necessarily capture reliable data. In 2008, about a year into the study, each participant was administered a short survey to collect basic demographic information to help us characterize the study population. Questions asked the participants' name, date of birth, place of birth, whether she was formerly associated or not, who the participant lived with, and names, dates of birth and locations of birth of each of the participant's children. Eight months later, our locally based academic partners randomly sampled 20% of participants in field sites in Sierra Leone and Liberia to be surveyed a second time with the same demographic survey module. When we compared the answers across the two time periods, we found significant unreliability of our data. For example, in Sierra Leone 64% of participants provided a different date of birth from the date that they stated in the earlier survey. In three of the rural field sites, there was 100% disagreement between the two dates of birth. Dates of birth given in the second survey varied by as many as 4 years from the earlier date of birth and varied in both directions – that is, participants did not uniformly identify as older or younger in the second survey; the variation appeared random. In Liberia, there was 56% variation in the name of the first child, 64% variation in the first child's year of birth and 72% variation in location of the first child's birth.

We were thus concerned that survey data may not be reliable, yet still wanted to make an attempt at gathering individual level information on outcomes of the study. We designed an elaborate participatory survey process, which we hoped would allow us to assess outcomes and also monitor for inconsistencies and reliability of the survey as we developed and administered it and analyzed its results. The survey process began with identifying what we termed participatory outcome indicators. This process started with participants in each field site compiling lists of important indicators of successful social reintegration during their community's young mothers' groups and at the countrywide girls' meetings. While 'indicator' is jargon that PAR staff understood, we unpacked this term for participants by asking, 'how would you know if this project has been a success'? And, 'What would be a good way to know if a young mother had been reintegrated into her community'? Project staff also sought input from community advisors about what they thought would be important to measure. Academic and agency partners used their experiences with the PAR to suggest additional indicators. We also used conversations with funders at our yearly meeting and regular email exchanges to identify additional indicators based on their priorities (e.g. funders were especially interested in reducing participation in transactional sex work and gender-based violence). In all, 47 individual indicators representing 21 categories were identified from this process.

These indicators were then assessed for face and construct validity in a series of participatory workshops across several field sites in Uganda, co-facilitated by the Ugandan and Western academic partners. Integrating this information, PAR organizers then compiled and ranked indicators by the frequency with which they were identified by participants across the three countries, viewing our role as facilitative rather than directive. We found that many constructs were suggested by participants at every field site (e.g. children able to attend school, being able to pay for basic necessities and feeling respected by the community). Though not identified by the

participants, the organizers decided also to include items that measured participation and what we termed 'do no harm' indicators, which measured unintended adverse consequences.

Western and African academics then met in Dakar, Senegal, to develop the survey procedures. This in-person meeting was essential to ensuring consistency in the process across the three countries, given different professional backgrounds and contexts. Local academic partners presented the compilation of all indicators to participants in at least two field sites per country to test for face validity and to rank them in order of importance, following the model developed by Bolton et al. (2004). In this formative phase, participants also provided feedback on the wording of questions in order to ensure understanding within each country's cultural context.

Based on the ranking of the indicators, a pilot survey with 19 three-point-scale (yes, sometimes, no) questions was developed and tested in at least two field sites in each country. Each question had a follow up qualitative 'probe' to gain more detail about the participants' answer and to ensure that the question was understood as intended. In addition, after completing the survey, participants were asked to provide qualitative feedback on the experience of taking the survey.

Through the pilot survey, we discovered that the qualitative probes gave us a depth of understanding for the meaning of participants' answers that enhanced our ability to interpret the findings of the survey. Thus, although it added to the burden for participants, survey implementers, and data analysts, we felt it was essential to preserve this component. The final survey had 20 items with at least 1 specific qualitative probe per question (see Appendix 3).

The survey was administered by local academics in close contact with PAR organizers. To ensure consistency across countries, we disseminated a narrative survey guide to explain the survey process (see Appendix 4). Survey facilitators interviewed individual participants privately, most often in their own homes. Data were entered locally and sent to PAR organizers for cleaning and analysis.

Although it is unusual in a survey of this scale to include qualitative questions, we found that the qualitative information tremendously improved the interpretability of the quantitative data. For example, when we analyzed the answers to the question 'My husband/boyfriend is supportive of my children', the quantitative results showed that a third of participants reported that their husband/boyfriend was supportive and 50% said he was not supportive. In exploring the qualitative responses, we identified several distinct patterns of relationships and types of support, including emotional and economic. One pattern, for example, was of husbands being supportive of their biological children but not children conceived during the war: 'He supports our children with food and clothes but he does not support the one that I came with from the bush'. Nuance like this would have been obscured with only quantitative results.

The survey contributed to the PAR evaluation by providing us with a quantitative measure of the study's ability to achieve its goal, which was the successful reintegration of PAR participants. This was the only evaluation method that allowed us quantitatively to evaluate the PAR and assess the reintegration outcomes for all study participants. The survey allowed for analysis at the participant, field site, agency, and country level. This assessment complemented the ethnographic work by allowing us to understand how representative our observations were of the breadth of experiences our participants and their families encountered. The results of the survey were published in a report we disseminated freely in hard copy and online (McKay, Veale, Worthen, & Wessells, 2010). UNICEF West Africa also funded the translation of the report into French.

The survey method was highly participatory. Study participants and stakeholders generated indicators and provided feedback on the importance of each construct, the wording of each question, and – through the qualitative probes – the interpretation of the findings. Like the ethnographic data, the survey data were shared back to the partner agencies, local academics, and participants in each field site. Thus, we honed closely to the principle of shared ownership of data, encouraging everyone to use the data that had been collected to support their work.

Discussion

The five methods described earlier were used complementarily to evaluate a complex, multi-country, participatory study and to identify transferable understandings. We discuss here four themes, complexity, reflexivity, quality and capacity, that capture the unique strengths of participatory evaluation in this context, and situate these observations in the participatory research and participatory evaluation literatures.

Complexity

The study that we sought to evaluate was highly complex, occupying geographically and culturally diverse spaces and bringing together people occupying widely disparate locations on several axes of power. An evaluation approach that seeks complexity rather than a reductionist understanding of phenomena was better suited to capture what we anticipated would be dynamic processes and multiple outcomes, both intended and unintended, of the study. Thus, we did not aim for 'triangulation,' which can be considered the use of multiple methods to arrive at a single conclusion, but rather multiple perspectives and tension (Clark & Moss, 2011).

As has been proposed by Chouinard and Cousins (2015), our participatory process evaluation was able to identify and clarify unintended consequences, both positive and negative, because it facilitated participants' identification of what was important to share, rather than imposing external indicators and accountability priorities. Each participant, agency partner, community advisory board member and academic partner engaged in the evaluation process from a position of co-learner and co-educator – to a greater or lesser extent for each method and at each period in the study. The evaluation benefited from these distinct perspectives and the interactions among them. In the literature, advantages of diversity on research teams is often spoken of as including 'bridge' people or 'knowledge brokers' – people who have differential access to community knowledge, yet are also familiar with the academic world (Muhammad et al., 2015). Our research team had multiple webs of dynamic 'space between' distinct insider–outsider roles (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), and to the extent that members of the team were empowered to set agendas, ask questions and own the results, the complexity of the evaluative knowledge produced and the validity of those results was enhanced. Indeed, as proposed by Muhammad et al. (2015), 'reflection on collaborative insider-outsider teams provides the possibility of understanding the effects of multiple identities and positionalities on research validity, processes and outcomes' (p. 1048). Our annual team meetings in Kampala were an illustration of this approach.

Reflexivity

We viewed the evaluation as part of an ongoing component of the study itself, and thus we placed a normative value on the evaluation being participatory, agreeing with Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) that the 'key difference between participatory and other research methods lies in the location of power' (pp. 1667–1668). Chouinard and Cousins (2013) describe participatory evaluation approaches as a 'collaborative partnership between evaluators and program community members' where evaluators and stakeholders are 'active co-constructors in the evaluative process' (p. 2). In order to benefit fully from this collaborative potential, we had to be open and discursive about power relationships. We engaged in these conversations from the beginning. For example, in our first meeting as researchers and agency staff, before participants were even recruited, we struggled over what to call each member of what became known as 'the research team.' Through conversation, we settled on 'PAR organizers' for the academic researchers who, in another context, could have been called 'Principal Investigators' or 'Study Directors.' 'Agency partners' was the term we arrived at for the representatives of each child protection agency who would be leading their agency's participation in the study.

Chouinard and Cousins (2015) further elaborate that while democratic principles are often employed within participatory evaluations to 'efface or counterbalance issues of power and privilege,' these principles are not always dominant in many settings where participatory evaluation is carried out (p. 17). While that was certainly true for the context of the PAR study, because the broader study was also participatory, we had space and time to engage reflexively with these tensions.

For example, during the PAR Team Meetings, young mother participants were in the same conference room as government ministers, heads of funding agencies, academics and staff of UN and child protection agencies. While Chouinard and Cousins (2015) note 'merely bringing everyone to the table is only the beginning' (p. 11), the research team used these meetings to model attentive listening and engagement. From seating arrangements to the agenda, we imaginatively strove to maximize participation and minimize power relationships (Newman, 2008). The participants did not just offer their own perspectives and ideas, but often pushed back when someone (donor, agency staff person, academic or peer) said something they disagreed with. Their experience of being listened to and respected in this setting further supported their development of self-esteem and confidence that their perspectives were valuable, which enhanced their participation locally. Participating in the evaluation in this manner promoted the participants' sense of agency and collective self-efficacy, which is a significant source of well-being and resilience. Thus, the participatory evaluation approach supported the desired outcomes of the study.

The PAR Team Meetings were also a critical setting for the research team to engage with funders in a way that promoted their engagement and built trust in the research team. Representatives of the funding agencies witnessed and engaged in dialogue where challenges were discussed frankly and productively, and multiple perspectives were shared. This reflexive dialogue with the study funders was instrumental in creating the space to conduct evaluation focused more on learning than accountability.

Quality

Springett and Wallerstein (2008) report that participatory evaluation can enhance the validity of data. We learned different information through participatory evaluation methods than we would have had we used traditional evaluation methods. As described earlier, these methods sought complexity and fostered buy-in, thus enhancing quality. Participants' engagement in the evaluation process guided what indicators were important to consider when assessing their reintegration. Most external evaluations of programming with war affected young people are deficits-focused, measuring outcomes like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. In contrast, we capitalized on the participants' knowledge of what the most important changes in their lives had been through the study process. In addition, by using a participatory process to develop the survey, we increased buy-in for the evaluation process itself, thereby increasing the participant's own interest in providing accurate data.

We also observed another facet of data quality that we do not believe has been discussed previously in the participatory evaluation literature. In the 'collaborative partnership' of the survey creation, it became clear to the academic partners that there was a conflict between what the young mother participants and the donors wanted investigated (see Appendix 4). Specifically, participants registered discomfort with questions about transactional sex work, but funders were keen to see a question included that assessed whether there had been a decline in transactional sex work among participants during the study period. Through the countrywide team meetings, pilot testing and focus groups about the survey development, we learned that a direct question about sex work would not be answered truthfully, though this was never stated explicitly. Rather than including a question we did not think would yield valid data, we opted to negotiate this tension by including a question that we anticipated would meet the donors' objectives while obscuring our understanding of transactional sex

work in practice. What emerged was a question that Ferme (1998) might recognize as a subversive use of quantification, whose results are uninterpretable. The question was 'Many girls in Sierra Leone/Liberia/Uganda have sex partners to earn money. Is this true of the girls in the PAR project?' Options were yes, sometimes, no. By writing a question that was not asking about experience on the individual level, we protected the participants from discomfort or the need to answer a question untruthfully to avoid shame. This was consistent with our principle of Do No Harm. However, we also wrote a question that defies quantification as a 'yes' response could be describing one person or many people. In this manner, we actively solicited what we knew would be uninterpretable data in the interest of avoiding what we suspected would be poor quality data that would be easy to interpret. Instead, we explored transactional sex work through our ethnographic evaluation process. Data quality might be understood, therefore, not just as the presence of high quality data, but also the absence of poor quality data.

Capacity

Chouinard and Cousins (2013) note that in the African participatory evaluation studies they examined, 'capacity building was identified as one of the primary rationales for adopting a participatory approach,' in contrast with most of the participatory evaluation literature they reviewed, which identifies capacity building as an outcome but not as a primary objective of participatory evaluation (p. 7). The discussion of capacity building in the participatory evaluation literature describes primarily a unidirectional process, where community members and stakeholders have their capacity built by outside evaluators. We contend that capacity building occurred for all involved in the PAR study and its evaluation.

In addition, capacity building was not hierarchically organized, but rather multidimensional. Peer learning was one of the most crucial aspects of capacity building. The young mother participants built their collective capacities for evaluation by reflecting periodically on how things were going and what adjustments might be needed. Agency partners met regularly as country teams and routinely reported appreciation of this critically reflective peer dialogue, which had not occurred prior to this collaboration. Discussions ranged beyond the PAR study and involved mutual capacity building about broader child protection issues. Academic partners and organizers similarly engaged in mutual dialogue to deepen understandings, trouble shoot and develop new strategies, and the collective capacity developed through this participatory evaluation has enhanced subsequent work beyond the study.

We viewed the use of participatory methods as a 'practice,' a way of being that we strive to embody and are continually learning more about. This practice seemed to come most naturally to the young mother participants, who were perhaps less steeped in traditional relations of development interventions, academic research or donor-agency power relations, and thus had fewer pre-conceptions about how, for whom and why the PAR study and its evaluation should take place.

Initially, adoption of highly participatory methods was a stretch for many of our community and agency partners. In the beginning, it was very hard for them to believe that the young mother participants had the capacity to lead the study. Similarly, the academic partners struggled against the urge to be directive when local partners or young mothers' groups seemed to be floundering or actively solicited advice. However, through the life of the study, those involved grew to recognize and appreciate the abilities of the young mothers and to see the benefits of supporting participants in increasing their capacity rather than shifting into a more traditional child protection program or study. This built the capacity of academic partners, agency staff and donors to engage in participatory research and evaluation and to integrate this practice into other aspects of their life and work.

Conclusion

Despite the promotion of participatory evaluation methods over the past 20 years, it continues to be generally absent from practice in the African development context (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015). The right of children to participate in decision-making processes relevant to their lives is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet remains a challenge to implement (UNICEF). We provide an example of how participatory methods can be used to evaluate a participatory study with war affected young people. Even in the context of low literacy, participants can be included in the development and measurement of indicators. Through engaging participants in participatory evaluation methods, indicators can have increased validity, findings can be obtained that may otherwise not come to light, and participants can grow to understand their own strengths and abilities, leading to a sense of empowerment. If the purpose of a participatory study is to change power relations, then the evaluation process must also be transformative and not replicate the very dynamics of privileging certain voices over others that the study aims to address.

The use of participatory evaluation processes contribute to a wider, participant-driven process that is likely to produce higher levels of ownership and sustainability of desired outcomes. To support movement towards the Sustainable Development Goals, practitioners and evaluators may want to consider more participatory evaluation approaches as one method of enhancing sustainability.

Note

1. Praxis is Paulo Freire's concept of how critical reflection and action are interconnected and one must engage in both for transformative change to occur (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006).

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