

(RE)-ENGAGING FEMINIST WAYS OF KNOWING THROUGH AND BETWEEN SOCIAL (DIS) LOCATIONS

(RE)-ENGAJAMENTO COM TEORIAS FEMINISTAS DO CONHECIMENTO ATRAVÉS E ENTRE (DES)LOCAMENTOS SOCIAIS

(RE)COMPROMISO CON MANERAS FEMINISTAS DE CONOCER MEDIANTE Y ENTRE (DIS)LOCACIONES SOCIALES

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the tensions and dislocations linked to my doctoral fieldwork in El Salvador. I reflect upon my experiences as an emerging community psychologist, engaging with feminist theory to frame my praxis and draw out new directions for social justice research based in ethics, witnessing and inclusive knowledge practices.

KEYWORDS: Feminist ways. Inclusion. Social justice.

RESUMO: Este artigo explora as tensões e deslocamentos ligados a minha pesquisa de campo de doutorado em El Salvador. Reflito sobre minhas experiências como uma psicóloga comunitária em processo de formação (ou - emergente), engajada com teorias feministas para subsidiar minha *praxis* e apontar novas direções para a pesquisa na área da justiça social, fundada na ética, através da observação de práticas de conhecimento inclusivas.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Teorias feministas. Inclusão. Justiça social.

RESUMEN: Este artículo explora las tensiones y dislocaciones vinculadas a mi trabajo de campo de doctorado en El Salvador. Reflexiono acerca de mi experiencias como una psicóloga comunitaria emergente, comprometida con la teoría feminista para enmarcar mi práctica y extraer nuevas direcciones para la investigación de justicia social basada en la ética, el testimonio y las prácticas del conocimiento integradoras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Maneras feministas. Inclusión. Justicia social.

INTRODUCTION

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As a young female graduate student I was attracted to the field of community psychology because of its expressed commitments to social justice and empowerment. As part of the program of study, I had the opportunity to take a course called “Women, Community and Power”, which resonated with these commitments. The work of Collins (1986) gave me a sense of how the personal was political, encouraging me to reflect on my gendered and racialized identity and processes of knowledge production. This course furthered my understanding of issues of gender and power in research, however, a major part of my research training favored logical positivism. These different orientations created significant tensions for me, and I continue to struggle with re-aligning my feminist commitments and methodologies in settings that seemingly value positivistic ways of knowing. After taking this course, much of the research I conducted during my graduate training was focused to be with or for women. However, it was my time in El Salvador that pushed me to engage in praxis, drawing from feminist and liberatory approaches in the field. This is where I struggled most with translating my ‘traditional’ research training, especially the underlying assumptions, into a different political and cultural setting, finding my voice, and constructing an identity as a feminist researcher committed to social justice.

From 2009 to 2011, I lived in a coastal community in El Salvador. My move was for both personal and professional reasons. I became a resident of El Salvador, working part-time as a teacher in a private high school in the city to pay for living expenses and costs for my PhD research project. The community in which I lived was small -- it was a ‘tourist’ destination for Salvadorans from the capital city, and those from the ‘North’ who came to surf and experience local culture. While my positioning in the community was as an outsider primarily, I had personal connections with one particular family, which arguably afforded me access to many aspects of community life (e.g., inclusion in local celebrations and day-to-day activities). Where I lived *extranjeros* have typically been consumers and the local economy is heavily dependent upon the seasonal influx of Northern tourists. My shift in location from the global ‘North’ to the ‘South’ was not only a physical movement to another place, but a shift in identity and belonging, which required me to understand some of the sociopolitical histories and geopolitical power relations that also manifest at community and individual levels. The transnational relationship between El Salvador and the United States is complex, characterized by neo-colonial practices, economic dependence (through remittances from Salvadorans abroad) and with a long history of violence during the civil war. As a white researcher from the North, these colonial histories, combined with my embeddedness in the

local context meant confronting power and privilege, which are products of my social location at the intersections of gender, class and nationality.

METHODOLOGY

My dissertation fieldwork was completed over a period of two years. The first part involved the participatory methodology of photovoice to engage two groups of young people in the exploration of their communities. The research objective was to explore sociopolitical (SPD) development, a theory based upon Freire's (1970) notion of conscientization. SPD is defined as "the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression" (WATTS; WILLIAMS; JAGERS, 2003, p. 185). This theory equally values a vision of liberation to provide an alternative to oppressive conditions. Photovoice, a creative method drawing on feminist theory and conscientization, is a method that aligned with the goal of this research. Participants visually document and tell stories about their lives, building collective awareness and action. The dialogue-based approach shifts the research process so that participants and researchers are co-learners, working together to develop solutions. The two groups of young people I worked (aged 11-14 and 15-19) with chose topics such as tourism, pollution, poverty and young people's lives in the community as some of the issues to explore. In contrast, in the second part of the study I employed quantitative methods consisting of questionnaires which surveyed adolescents aged 14 to 21 in five high schools (n=686) situated in rural, urban and coastal regions across the country. The questionnaires explored how community contexts (e.g., poverty) relate to young people's social identities, psychological sense of community and civic and political engagement. Part of this work involved developing a culturally appropriate measure of sociopolitical development informed by the photovoice findings (BAKER; BROOKINS, 2014). The second part of the study involved travelling to schools and waiting while students filled out the questionnaires, thus there was very little contact with individual young people.

REFLECTIONS

Epistemological Tensions

While the mixed methodology seemed sound and would generate rigorous data, I felt uncomfortable, a discomfort that reflected new understanding of the politics

conducting research across countries, cultures, histories. One of the tensions related to different relationships researchers have with participants and their life worlds and the implicit power relationships. While photovoice pushes co-participation and positioning of the ‘subject’ as expert, the survey method ascribed meanings through measurement of variables. Photovoice, a participatory action research method (PAR), appeared to reduce the distance between young people in the project and myself, whereas the quantitative method aimed to be ‘objective,’ neutral, and thus understanding phenomena from ‘God’s eye view’ (HARAWAY, 1988). These tensions reflect the struggle I was experiencing based upon the requirements of my graduate studies. My reflections on gender and privilege and power in research surfaced concerns about epistemological appropriateness and the potential for social change.

Tracing pathways of privilege

I reflected upon the lives of the young girls in my photovoice project and tried to trace the pathways of privilege and examine the circuits of dispossession (FINE, 2014, p. 228), which Fine describes as investigating “how policies affect place, social relations, and identities, which flow into a range of social psychological outcomes”. She defines this lens as an interrogation into the operation of power across macro and microstructures:

a circuits analysis investigates the social psychological transit of inequity across scale (structure, policy, institutions, relationships, psychological, and embodied Selves), across place (nation, zip code, communities of privilege, and disadvantage), and across sectors (education, labour, criminal justice, and psychological wellbeing). (FINE, 2014, p. 228)

As identified by Fine (2014) and illustrated in past work (FINE; RUGLIS, 2008) such an analysis is crucial in moving beyond ‘traditional binaries’ that are often fixed to a particular sociohistorical context. For me, using this understanding as a lens for reflection has deepened my awareness of where our experiences as young women converged and diverged. I remember in the last session, two girls aged 11 and 12 brought in photographs depicting soccer balls and one with her surfboard (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

Figure 1 – Girls with her surfboard.



Fonte: Author of Photography.

Figure 2 - Soccer balls Photograph.



Fonte: Author of Photography.

They spoke about the importance of sport in their lives, not only for their physical health, but because represented a chance to stay on ‘the right path,’ which involved staying away from alcohol and hanging out with the wrong crowd. When they discussed a

photograph of a backpack, they reflected on the importance of education, getting them closer to becoming a ‘double professional,’ such as being a pro surfer and a lawyer. The older group of participants, which was held separately, included two young women in their late teens. Their reflections upon their chosen topic of ‘poverty in the community’ was in contrast to the younger group as they identified disproportionate number of single mothers living in impoverished conditions in the area. They linked this to teenage pregnancies that often resulted in young women having to abandon their education to support their families.

In my reflections on gender it was apparent how societal structures, policies and culture affected aspects of the young women’s lives. I related to our similarities through a love for sports and learning, but realized the differences in our opportunities to live out these dreams. As a young white woman from Canadá/Australia I had been, and continue to be, privileged; in the opportunities that were available to me growing up in a two parent, white, middle class home, as well as more broadly in a prosperous society in the global north. Having played soccer throughout my life I secured a college scholarship in the United States, allowing me to be an athlete and earn a degree simultaneously. I considered the policies in place that had, for me, equalized the playing field (e.g. Title IX in the United States) and altered some of the structures that had kept women from accessing the same opportunities as men. The convergence of such privileges brought me to a very different social position than many of the young women in this Salvadoran community who were my age. Feminist practice/activism have benefited some in my generation and certain countries, but this has not necessarily been extended to many young women in global south. Feminist post-colonial scholars provide a useful lens for rethinking ways of doing research, especially within the broader context of global power relations. While we are both gendered and so differently positioned, an important question remained salient: how can we disrupt these binaries and work together to push upon the structures that aim to separate us, and privilege one over another?

What is not written into the Dissertation: Engaging with Guilt and Finding a Voice

At each of my dissertation milestones I often felt that the knowledge, which was transferred to me by the young people and community, was not being made central to the research story. I came to realize it was an issue of knowledge and power, with particular ways of knowing being privileged during the PhD process. I was afraid that I had not ‘done enough,’ and my dissertation document did not explicitly address some of the tensions I

experienced or the everyday knowledge of the participants or myself. The work was not assessed on its ability to initiate social change. After my defence, I felt overwhelming guilt and sadness: I had completed my PhD, but had I reproduced the exploitation by so many white tourists in the community had by consuming and then leaving? Doing what so many Northern white researchers have done before me in ‘Third World’ places? What were the young people gaining from my PhD research? In her work on decolonizing methodologies, Smith (1999) and others (REYES-CRUZ, 2008; REYES-CRUZ; SONN, 2011) highlight the importance of understanding how Western science has privileged a so-called ‘scientific’ way of knowing, perpetuating oppressive conditions for many colonized peoples. The notion that “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (REYES-CRUZ; SONN, 2011, p. 5) is not often recognized in the PhD training process where the goals and requirements can run contrary to this. Engaging with feminist understandings has drawn my attention to the potential for our work as psychologists to reproduce colonial power relations and epistemic violence through research. In particular, questions posed by Fine (2012) and Smith (1999) - regarding whose evidence counts, who is held accountable and what the community will gain from the research - are central to disrupting dominant modes of knowledge production and practices that legitimize the silencing of excluded groups.

Unlearning and (Re) Engaging

Since then I have been able to reflect upon the PhD process and my time in the field, re-engaging with feminist theory and commitments as I chart a new road map for developing feminist community psychology praxis. Fine (2012, p. 88) points out that “social researchers should always be the most vulnerable—not those being studied or ‘left’ behind once the research is complete”. While I may have experienced vulnerability as a result of my dislocations, my position as a University researcher remains a privileged one. Drawing from Smith (1999), I consider the implications for researchers who choose to ‘struggle’ and ‘belong’ in the margins, which means working to develop critical practice.

My personal and professional dislocations and experiences in the community have prompted me to (re) engage with feminism not only in focusing on research about or for women, but in negotiating ways of doing feminist social justice research. For me, this means interrogating my own assumptions, motivations and positionings, but not remaining there. In hindsight I can see that guilt can be a paralyzing force, however, it can

also facilitate reflexivity that isn't simply a confessional tale of privilege but part of moving into a space that allows us to "develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference" (LORDE, 1997, p. 329). A number of feminist scholars note the potential dangers of reflexivity to re-center whiteness for example, see Pillow (2003) and Smith (2013) by using 'others' to know more about ourselves by confessing privilege. Smith (2013, p. 275) contends that of particular importance are projects that "create that which we cannot know", because they contribute to the creation of new worlds and futurities.

For me (re) engaging with feminist and liberatory psychologies has meant unlearning positivist notions of expertise and objectivity, but most importantly rejecting the stance of the dispassionate observer. These learnings have solidified my commitment to PAR and 'liberation arts methodologies,' which, as Watkins and Shulman (2008) note, are central to co-creating counterstories and legitimizing other forms of knowledge. It is through such methods that traditional binaries are challenged and new ways of engaging are enacted. Smith (2013) contends that reflexivity is part of the ongoing process of navigating ways that can bridge across difference and develop action plans that can be used together for transformation of current conditions. Such learnings continue to have relevance and collective implications for young women across the North and South who are (re) engaging with feminism and becoming the next generation of scholars, activists, or community members committed to social justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the reviewers for their feedback on this paper. I would also like to thank Christopher Sonn and Kitty te Riele for their encouragement and guidance in developing this paper.

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Recebido em abril de 2015

Aprovado em julho de 2015