Participatory politics of partnership: video workshops on domestic violence in Cambodia

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In this paper we share insights from four participatory video workshops held in Cambodia as part of a three-year project on domestic violence and legal reform under the ESRC/DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research scheme. The participatory politics that emerged from the workshops organised in partnership with a Cambodian gender-oriented non-governmental organisation (NGO) and an independent translator/co-facilitator forms the crux of our discussion. We define 'participatory politics of partnership' as the multi-layered power relations between community groups, gatekeepers and researchers whose respective agency is mediated by the political economy the research emerges from, and takes place within. Highlighting discrepancies between 'gold standard' participatory ideals and practice, we argue through three vignettes that greater acknowledgement is needed of intermediaries whose statuses and behaviours, like those of researchers, heavily mediate community engagement in participatory action research.

Key words: participatory video, action research, power, NGO, translator, Cambodia

Introduction

This paper considers participatory politics that emerged from four participatory video (PV) workshops organised in partnership with a Cambodian gender-oriented non-governmental organisation (NGO) and an independent translator/co-facilitator.[1] We define 'participatory politics of partnership' as the multi-layered power relations between community groups, gatekeepers and researchers whose respective agency is mediated by the political economy the research emerges from, and takes place within. As such our approach speaks to conceptualised binaries of domination and resistance that 'become scrambled when striving to provide more grounded commentaries alert to the chaotic muddle of empirical situations' (Sharp *et al*. 2000, 2). PV is a process-oriented collaborative undertaking in which 'interaction, sharing and cooperation' open up possibilities for 'personal, social, political and cultural change' (White 2003, 64). In this context, PV fits into the broader reach of Participatory Action Research (PAR). One *modus operandi* within PAR that we were conscious to adopt was that 'the outsider must be aware of being a participant rather than an expert and expect to be taught rather than to teach' (Winton

2007, 499). Emphasising the least amount of control over the participatory process, a researcher's role is supposed to be one of opening speaking space through tools and techniques that enable community members to subvert hegemonic power structures (Cooke 2001).

While we do not question the value of this ethos, in practice we found it complicated by power dynamics that 'cannot be avoided' in PAR work (Kesby 2005, 2038). Factors include, but are not limited to, the political economy of publicly funded research in the UK and our academic positioning in a higher education environment of intensified pressures to publish more and demonstrate 'impact'. These factors also interface with the political economy of Cambodia itself and the survival of national NGOs with its associated raft of freelance development consultants. All combine to produce a complex landscape of influences and interests that highlight some of the fallacies of PAR theory. As such, we tie our analysis into an emergent literature critical of how 'stepping down from power and privilege, even as one exercises them as master of ceremony, is a reinforcement, not a diminishment, of such power and privilege' (Kapoor 2005, 1207). Namely, we explore the PAR ideals that inevitably fail 'by forecasting unachievable goals, such as completely transforming

iniquitous power relations' (Shaw 2012, 229). Rather, we contend that our statuses and behaviours, like those of intermediaries both 'on the ground' and 'behind the scenes', heavily mediated 'participatory' engagement with community members. To illustrate this, we start with a general overview of the project and its various stakeholders. Next we turn to the 'participatory politics of partnership' with the NGO, and our translator/co-facilitator, Dara, thereafter. Exploring these intricate geometries through three vignettes, the conclusion finishes by highlighting the challenges and pretences of adhering to 'gold standards' of PV where researchers step out of the decisionmaking process.

Setting the scene to the project architecture

Both authors of this paper were 'outsiders' to the NGO and communities, bringing funding, video technology and ideas from the UK. From one perspective, we were also capitalising on local knowledge to undertake a PV project beneficial to our academic careers, not in the least through the publication of this paper. Garrett drew on his UK experiences of ethnographic videomaking with a close-knit community (Garrett 2010) and was keen to extend his methodological repertoire to PV. Brickell meanwhile bid for, and managed, the three-year project (2012–14) in Cambodia on domestic violence and legal reform under the Economic and Social Research Council/Department for International Development (ESRC/DFID) Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research. Albeit with a decade of independent research experience in Cambodia, the project represented her first formal research partnership with a NGO. Brickell's approach to the workshops in Cambodia built on PV work in Vietnam used to understand socioeconomic transition and its influence on family life (see Brickell 2014). Through challenging experiences of using PV in the post-socialist context, she was aware that 'advocates of participation should not "open their tool kit"' without first considering the contingent impacts of the existing landscape of political governance' (Kesby 2007, 2821). Indeed, the political economy of Cambodia and the formation of social relationships is traditionally based on hierarchy, deference, patronage and an acceptance of the social order (Hughes 2003). Conditioning the potential for resistance to participatory intervention, Brickell was dually conscious of reviewers' comments in the publishing of her previous PV work – that the (unintended) inclusion of community elite was 'highly problematic' and an 'appropriation of the PVD process'. Just as in Vietnam where 'local participation in development activities tends to be disproportionately dominated by the state and closely-affiliated elite village groups' (Scott *et al*. 2006, 32), it was anticipated that similar pressures would be experienced in Cambodia and

comparable criticisms levelled thereafter. As a researcher then, the conundrum between demonstrating 'gold standards' principles of participatory research to peers and 'working with' conditions on the ground was present from the outset. In fact, both of our respective encounters rendered us particularly sensitive to what Williams (2013, 223–4) has referred to as 'the politicised relations inherent within knowledge mobilisation'. For the purposes of critical reflection, and with the consent of all involved, the PV workshops were voice recorded, transcribed and translated from Khmer into English. In addition, we kept field diaries and Brickell returned to Cambodia six months later to interview Dara, our translator. The empirical insights in this paper draw on this preparedness.[2]

The PV workshops formed a key part of the larger mixed-method study. PV was chosen as a means to understand men and women's collective perspectives on what is normatively considered a private family matter in Cambodia (Brickell 2008). While the use of PV to research violence must be approached with caution (Winton 2007), in line with feminist moral and political discourse, the commune-level workshops were structured to encourage domestic violence to be (re)positioned as a publicly significant issue for the lifespan of the three-day events at least. The use of video for social change and the awareness raising of injustices, including violence against women as part of the One Billion Rising campaign,[3] was also gaining momentum in Cambodia and was of interest to the NGO to carry forward (the equipment now remains with the NGO post-grant).

In respect to overall research design, and the place of PV within it, the first phase of the project in spring 2012 comprised a household survey of 1177 villagers organised by the project's quantitative expert, Cambodian Co-Investigator Dr Bunnak Poch, with the trained help of his university students across four rural and four urban communes in two case-study provinces – Siem Reap and Pursat. Brickell, the qualitative lead, together with Garrett and NGO project coordinator, followed this research with the PV workshops across a period of six weeks in summer 2012. The decision to hold these in only half of the surveyed communities (one urban/one rural in each respective province) was a difficult one to judge. As researchers we tried to balance a concern for inclusivity with budgetary and time constraints that may unintentionally force a 'quick and dirty' use of the technique (Kindon 2012). Other competing factors also played out: a NGO keen for the workshops to be held in all the communes where they operated, and the funders in their bid feedback emphasising their desire for comparative data on rural/urban communities where NGO presence was also absent.

The participatory video workshops included a standard programme of PV activities over three days, where par-

ticipants were invited to participate in return for a day rate. The day rate emerged from concerns voiced to the NGO project coordinator in pre-workshop visits that too often training precluded those working from taking part (for fear of lost income). Garrett and Brickell met the participants for the first time on the morning of day one, introduced themselves, set up the collectively agreed ground rules, and began undertaking peer-to-peer audio-visual technology learning exercises. A second round of training took place after the morning break. In the afternoon, community mapping was used to identify social issues related to domestic violence. On day two, the video was storyboarded and shot. While during group work we encouraged participants to think about using different ways to communicate their message, all the videos included a participatory video drama (PVD) dimension. According to Waite and Conn (2011) the 'fiction–reality boundary' that is created by PVD enables participants to more comfortably voice their opinions and experiences (see Brickell and Garrett 2014). Day three saw a portable projector used to edit the footage collectively, and when possible to show the video at a commune screening. Following a traditional PV model, we aimed over the course of the three days to slowly let go of control so that by day two we had stepped out of the process completely, present only to solve occasional technical glitches. It was left open to participants whether they would produce a video for wide viewing, for internal use only or indeed at all. This message contradicted promises made in the original grant application to a scheme that places a premium on research with 'Southern partners' where there is 'high potential for impact on policy and practice in low-income countries' (ESRC-DFID 2013, 2). While the original funding proposal stated that all the videos would be showcased via a press launch at the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) in Phnom Penh at which media and key policymakers would attend, in the planning phase we discussed concerns about ESRC-DFID impact-oriented pressures also voiced by Williams (2012, 494) that 'incentivizes forms of risk-taking' and 'whose negative consequences are likely to fall most heavily and directly on local research partners, frontline staff or, worse still, vulnerable research participants themselves'. Instilling an immediate onus on product rather than process (again a less than 'gold standard' approach to PAR), we were concerned that we ran the risk of privileging video as a means of brokering 'impact' with policymakers rather than generating new levels of self-awareness among participants.

In the first half of 2013, Brickell, the project coordinator, and two research assistants conducted in-depth interviews in the four communes with male and female villagers (40) and domestic violence victims (40). In the months after, this was followed by 40 interviews with stakeholders central to domestic violence-reduction efforts in the two provinces. The sequencing of the project as a whole was deliberate, embracing a participatory development approach that promotes a 'bottom-up' politics in which lay experiences and viewpoints were used to question legal professionals, NGO workers, local and district police officers and other authority leaders about their (limited) efforts to broker change. In the final year of the grant, Brickell held interviews in January 2014 with high-level policymakers and development practitioners in Phnom Penh, before in March 2014 each of the communes were revisited and meetings held with both lay and institutional members to feed back the overall findings. Since this point, the research findings have been published in an infographic report (Brickell *et al*. 2014) that has subsequently featured as front-page news in Cambodian national newspapers (see for example Woodside and Sen 2014). They also provided Brickell with the resource and knowledge base to provide UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)-funded training at a Phnom Penh-based university to undergraduate law students who had not previously studied domestic violence law as part of their degree courses.

The Cambodian NGO partner and community engagement: on whose terms?

The project partner is one of the many specialist NGOs working in the interests of human rights that emerged throughout the 1990s after decades of turmoil at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. It provides training and organisational capacity to mainstream gender into policies and programmes, engages in advocacy and networking to raise gender awareness, and runs an outreach unit that works to develop and disseminate gender information and laws at grassroots levels. Acting as gatekeeper to this expertise, the NGO afforded logistical access to research permissions needed at the commune, district and provincial level. The NGO's appreciation for the sensitive nature of the research and the potential need for local referral services in instances when domestic violence cases came to light were paramount. Balanced against what was, and remains, a productive relationship, we highlight one way in which 'participatory politics of partnership' emerged in decisionmaking on who was included in the video workshops, and how the group was facilitated thereafter by the hired freelance translator/co-facilitator, Dara.

Prior to the implementation of the workshops, we repeatedly reinforced in our Skype, email and face-to-face communications with the NGO project coordinator the importance of providing skills and voice to those who might not usually have an opportunity to participate in such events (thus effectively seeking to exclude institutional and governmental representatives). While the study

as a whole sought to understand 'local' and 'institutional' perspectives on domestic violence and law, we explained that the PV work was seeking to engage more substantially with lay local knowledges. When we initially introduced ourselves on the morning of the second workshop, it was clear that some of the selected participants either held positions of authority or were socially connected to the NGO itself. It had transpired that the project coordinator, herself a 'remote' Phnom Penh-based 'outsider' to the communities, devolved responsibility for selection to commune-level authorities, and albeit with our guidelines provided, included the daughter of a village leader in one instance. We found this problematic because it might preclude people from being critical toward the way the village leader might handle a domestic violence situation. In recent decades the role of such leaders has become politicised as their growing ties to the Cambodian Peoples' Party, in power since 1979, has created the potential for suspicion and division among community members (Luco 2002).

While Jacobs and Price suggest in a Cambodian context that, 'a key institutional prerequisite for the successful implementation of community participation is a local community-based organisation to lead the process' (2003, 399), this assumes too that an organisation furthering its alliances with power brokers does not lead to co-option of the participatory process. Although NGOs often have a strong sense of social justice, they also must work to bolster their standing in communities, often by working alongside existing power structures. In the run-up to the July 2013 national elections, for example, the ruling party, sensing NGOs as a potential base for opposition politics, were designing a law that would require registration with the government in order to have legal standing. It is also the case as Hailey points out, that NGOs, ostensibly exactly the agencies affecting social change, are filled with 'educated, articulate individuals whose power is derived from their access to funds, political contacts and new technologies' (2001, 96). Confronting the rhetoric of community participation and what we interpreted as the reinforcing of existing social hierarchies, we agonised over our role.

Let us provide one vignette of an incident that reflects this. In the third workshop, the Deputy Governor of the province was on the participant list. We questioned this with the NGO prior to the workshop, but her presence was justified on the grounds that as a rarely elected female leader, we should support her skills development. We of course acquiesced, not wanting to offend. After spending the morning with participants establishing ground rules and the ethos of working on equal terms, we noted that the Deputy Governor was absent. When the first break came, Dara called her. She told Dara she was not going to arrive until later in the morning. One of the agreed group

rules was that everyone 'respect time' in the workshop and we were not sure how to handle a member of the group breaking the group rules, given we were trying not to 'control' the process. By lunch, the Deputy Governor still had not arrived. Garrett, driven by a sense of fairness to other participants, told Dara to call her back and explain that too much of the workshop had been missed for her to participate. Despite reminding him of the ground rules collectively determined, Dara refused to call. He then replied, in a very serious tone, 'This is Cambodia and I should not interfere with her'. Turner explains in Vietnam and China, 'that it is not always immediately obvious to Western researchers that careful negotiations and social positioning are being undertaken by research assistants, as well as the potential stress and anxiety that this can cause' (2010, 213). Just as Dara appeared uncomfortable at Garrett's request, we too felt an overwhelming sense of unease, wondering whether we were being overzealous in trying to instil a horizontal structure while at the same time trying to foster a philosophy of 'letting go of control' under the traditional PV model. As Cornwall reflects,

> Any newly created space quickly comes to be filled with expectations, relationships, institutions and meanings that have been brought from elsewhere, and which impinge upon how that space comes to be experienced. (2004, 85)

In practice, if not in theory, PV workshops are not 'post-political' 'states of exception' that can be divorced from politics (Korf 2010, 709–10). Indeed, the Deputy Governor was bringing her own agency and set of norms tied to Cambodian political culture to the workshop. This vignette thereby does analytical work by highlighting the difficult decisions that researchers make in engagement with gatekeepers as they attempt to operationalise participatory principles in environments shot through with the exercising of power and political etiquette that Dara was unwilling to transgress.

The translator/co-facilitator: participatory politics of 'getting on with the job'

While Dara had not facilitated a PV workshop before, he had extensive experience of facilitating with NGOs, in a few cases using participatory methods. In the days before the workshops, we spent time together talking at length about PV, its ethos, how it worked in practice, and discussing any questions he had. Framing his role as co-facilitator, we adapted this approach after separately attending a week-long course by InsightShare, who suggested training translators as PV facilitators – 'That way they can get on with the job with minimum input from us (being strangers/foreigners)' (Lunch and Lunch 2006, 57). 'Getting on with the job' involves more negotiation than

such detached recommendations credit, however. A second vignette exemplifies this. In the aftermath of a disagreement with Dara, Brickell scribbled in her field diary the following:

> Dara publically deemed my conversations with a participant during a break 'inappropriate' in front of everyone. I felt so angry and humiliated. Given men's reluctance to speak as much as women in the workshops, I was keen to understand their point of view on family life, so in the break when I had the more informal opportunity, I started asking a male participant about how marriage worked in their community (i.e. customary or registered etc.). Dara told me in front of everyone, 'Stop it. Stop being inappropriate, they're on a break'. This stung.

While hurt at the time, in retrospect Brickell acknowledges her own wielding of power and privilege in this moment, 'stepping-in' outside the formal sessions to re-assert herself as a researcher with the right to question. Given her 'backseat' role during the workshop, Brickell wanted to know more directly about participants' marital lives and to further signal a commitment to learning from them. Dara's reference to 'being inappropriate' may have arisen from the frustration of being asked to translate questions eschewed as the minutiae of everyday life. As Cottrell and Parpart note, 'Many field-based academics focus on minutiae that can reveal subtle attitudes and behaviour, which are often regarded as a waste of time by community partners' (2006, 18–19). In Brickell's interview with Dara, she cautiously asked him why she was told to 'stop it'. He replied, 'Sometimes you are just so curious to get things but Cambodians do not like that'. Perhaps it was not inconsequential that Brickell was also pushing a man to talk about domestic life ordinarily considered a feminine domain. Hindsight also suggests that Dara's suggestion that 'they're on a break' was as much a cry to be allowed to have a break himself.

A third vignette highlights a related 'participatory politics of partnership' linked to the limited amount of time in the workshops and the expectation of ESRC/DFID, the NGO and particularly Dara, that we have a tangible product. Becoming more confident after the first workshop, we noticed that Dara exhibited a tendency to 'direct' the films. We became caught between wanting to enforce a 'hands-off' approach and not wanting to lead the project by enforcing exactly that. A review of a workshop audio-recording gave us further insight into this dynamic. During storyboarding a video-drama in the second workshop, participatory politics ensued between Dara and the participants. Towards its conclusion, Dara commented that,

> I think in order to complete this story at the end of the film we should offer an educational message to the perpetrator to stop the violence. In this regard, I think the village chief should play a role in educating the husband to stop the violence against his wife then he should say 'if you don't stop this type of violence against your wife and children, firstly, it will destroy your family's reputation within the commune. Secondly, your wife will be injured or become a disabled person or destroy the family property. Thirdly, your children will experience domestic violence and won't want to go to school anymore'.

Dara's guidance of the drama narrative is evidenced as he explains *his* vision to participants, even offering direct speech. Yet a number of female participants took issue with his vision, arguing that in 'real life' the husband wouldn't even turn up to be 'educated'. Here then multiple participants tried to exert agency over the storytelling process, yet were rebuffed. Particular techniques and tools used to implement a PV project, especially the technology, already 'frame' the project in accordance with the norms attached to the technology (Kothari 2001). So in the case of using a video camera, Dara perhaps expected that a finished product would follow the aesthetic and narrative coding familiar with that medium – it will have a beginning, middle and an end. Yet as we have written elsewhere, women's experiences of domestic violence rarely result in finite closure (Brickell and Garrett 2014).

It was at this point then that we broke from PAR ideals and stepped in, asking him to be very careful not to direct the films. We explained it was an inclusive process of video-making together that we were interested in, not necessarily the result. This model was judged 'inefficient' and would not allow Dara to create what he called a 'high quality product' that would be 'really good for any report', and which we could deliver to our policy-oriented funders. Dara, who was freelancing at the time, was also understandably keen to build up a body of work to improve his chances of securing a permanent NGO position. In fact, a job interview loomed soon after the workshops and Dara clearly wanted a 'deliverable' for the interview to show his skills to an international NGO with a demonstrated interest in video advocacy. We also understood, however, that Dara also wanted the workshop participants to feel a sense of accomplishment after three days of work by having a finished product (in the form of a DVD) to take home. A large part of the problem, of course, is that we had scheduled the workshops too tightly and if Dara/the group were going to produce something, there was not a lot of room for debate over how it was to be done. We had inadvertently put so much time pressure on Dara that he had perhaps compensated for our over-ambition by too strongly leaning in to ensure an output was produced.[4] A range of 'participatory politics of partnership' therefore mediated participants' engagements in the workshops that in the third vignette transpired to dampen rather than enliven their agency.

Concluding thoughts

Through a series of workshop vignettes this paper has outlined some of the tensions that arise between and for researchers and the intermediaries they work with. Our reflections candidly illustrate how PV projects encompass hybrid issues oriented around the exercising of power and agency that have an almost indelible influence over the nature of community participation in PAR. These complexities are mediated by the political economy the research emerges from, and takes place within: the data, impact, and publishing priorities of project funders and wider higher education sector in the UK that (perhaps unduly) influence researchers' decisions on initial research design; the political cultures that challenge the theoretical meaning of 'participation' in PAR and that influence NGO needs; and the career motivations and guiding etiquettes of translators/co-facilitators.

A messy terrain of interests emerge that problematise researchers' ability to uphold PAR 'gold standards' but to which we, and others, continue to hold our practice up against. What is clear is that the field of PV is far from mechanistic as much of the bullet-pointed guidance on this technique suggests. While it might be too determinist to say that PV always advocates a 'hands off' approach by researchers, existing scholarship leaves this impression, or certainly romanticises it, and this is not always helpful. Researchers, and their peers, must further recognise the 'knotted threads' of power (Sharp *et al*. 2000, 1) across the lifecourse of any participatory project. Greater reflexivity in participatory video confronts conventional research practice, insisting on greater reflexivity and negotiation. Working in partnership not only means navigating and actively balancing a complex set of positionalities, prerogatives and power geometries, but also being pragmatic enough to realise that ideals and practice rarely reconcile. It is for this reason that being reflective about the entanglements of power, be they social, cultural or technological, is essential to the implementation of any PV project and it is in that process where we should look for successful 'outcomes'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 We do not name the research partner in this paper, nor do we use the real name of the translator/co-facilitator, who we have called Dara.

2 Less prevalent within the paper are the reflective voices of lay participants in response to the workshops. In hindsight, finding a way to more critically access their expectations and experiences pre and post workshop should have been made a higher priority. While participants filled out an evaluation form at the end of the workshop, these provided only basic insights on their technical learning and enjoyment.

3 See http://www.onebillionrising.org for more information on the global campaign to support women survivors of violence to voice their experiences in public.

4 In hindsight, we should have decided on a maximum of two workshops. This may have eased pressures and enabled dialogue to be valued rather than cast as a distraction.

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