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## Trades in different worlds: listening to refugee voices

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### • Introduction

Rehearsed in anthropological methods and assuming that my questions could best be explored through participant observation, I arrived in Nepal in 1993 to spend a year amongst Bhutanese refugees<sup>1</sup>. As an anthropologist, building trust and relationships were a priority. Together with my neighbours, I built a hut and began to learn their language, spent time in their homes and became part of the community. In the process, it became apparent that they had expectations about what I could do for them. They had questions too. Displaced and disempowered, denied access to decision-making structures, they wanted a channel for their views. My neighbours perceived me as a 'provider' in a position of power as an 'outsider', whilst affiliation with Oxfam and the support from UNHCR brought institutional obligations. These practitioners required timely information, in a form that was accessible. It was not enough, in this context, to set my own agenda and quietly assume the part of the participant observer.

As a process through which the refugee community led and owned the information generated, PRA offered a way for some of these dilemmas to be resolved. We worked together, choosing the most appropriate method as questions arose. Three principal methodologies were used in parallel: questionnaire surveys, PRA and participant observation<sup>2</sup>. Questionnaires were used with a

random sample of women aged 15-45. PRA exercises were carried out with the same informants, some before and some after survey interviews for comparative purposes.

Observations were recorded (see Figure 1) to enhance interpretation of the information. This paper focuses on how these methodologies differed and explores questions of validity, appropriateness and complementarity.

### Shared worlds, shared interests?

Each of us has our own life experience that shapes the way we make sense of and are understood by others. These experiences, and the interactions that research involves, inhibit as well as enable particular kinds of insights. Recognising this has encouraged greater reflexivity about relations of power in research. Yet academics ultimately use people's *"lives to produce texts for personal gain and despite attempts to give a participatory voice the relationship always remains unequal"* (Strathern, 1987).

This *"awkward relationship"* (Strathern, 1987) between activism and academic research raises dilemmas not only for how others are represented in anthropologists' texts, but also for the practice of anthropological research itself. In conventional anthropological research:

*"Anthropologists take information and leave to analyse it elsewhere. Sometimes they venture back to share their findings. Often not. Not only are the objects of their knowledge excluded from analysis, they are also denied ownership of their information for their own planning and use"* (Cornwall, 1992).

<sup>1</sup> The refugees had fled from Bhutan to Nepal as a result of cultural conflict.

<sup>2</sup> The study lasted a month, and involved three co-researchers and 12 facilitators, each with one week's training on the specific survey methodology. At least two trained PRA facilitators were present at each PRA group exercise.

For the refugees with whom I worked, giving them a 'participatory voice' in the texts I produced was not enough. Gathering information that I alone would analyse and comment on later would not meet their expectations, nor those of the agencies who assisted me. The refugees, in their particularly disempowered situation, were acutely aware of inequalities brought about by being *acted on* rather than *actors with* the agencies. Participatory processes gave them greater ownership, confidence and a measure of control. One co-worker commented: 'Usually we undertake written interviews and take the answers away on paper [back to the agency]. In PRA the refugee people owned most of the process and made copies themselves of their work.'

The significance of participating in the process was highlighted when refugees requested that the outcomes from PRA exercises be displayed

in public spaces. Despite different cultural worlds and the obvious personal gain of academic work, one key social interest was shared through the research: knowledge. And through shared knowledge, they perceived were wider gains:

*"If we had been less ignorant, literate and aware of our rights, we would not have had to leave our homeland, we would not be refugees now. PRA enables us to explain ourselves and builds our confidence to speak out even in groups"* (refugee facilitator).

Knowledge acquisition in its own right had created opportunities for empowerment, but was not regarded by everyone as a goal that merited the price of participation. Some people remained concerned that not all the research undertaken 'with them' was necessarily 'for them'.

Figure 1. Sample of observations made during participatory exercises

Exercise Topic: Reasons for using the health facilities Date: 25/03/94  
 Observers: Tamara Negaly Hemanta Subal Time: 14-20 Duration: 50 mins  
 Facilitator(s): Gita Rai, Bita Shakal Tool used: Matrix Rating

Respondents' Names	Location (Private/Public)	Respondents' Openness (Willingness to Participate)	Respondents' Transparency (Trust in Facilitators)	Fieldworker characteristics Influencing Factors (Researcher's Enjoyment)	Comments (Dominant Voices)
Sita Bhandari	In the school	She came forward and encouraged the other women to speak out	Very good	Playing the in-out game was fun as all the women joined in even those who just crowd ed round later.	Most dominant but will get her to pass the stick to the others.
Manmaya Mungar	Under the bamboo shelter	Very shy	she said that she used to take medicine provided by the agency but her neighbour had better health care because her husband was a doctor and she had to be pushed by the local doctors.	Sita was feeling sick, so sat and watched for sometime to tell the women to place the stones in the	good service but later Gita Mungar moved them.
Barchi Mungar		wanted photo taken			
Tamara		neighbour had got padder but her husband was a doctor			
Gita Mungar		Told a story about there not being any women doctor and school	very good, laughter		

## Hearing the unseen, seeing the unsaid

Marginal voices are often excluded in conventional development consultation with 'communities'. Official representatives, often educated men, are consulted as 'the voice of the people' often simply because they offer the easiest access into the community. The non-participation of some of the most resourceful and skilled individuals may be overlooked as a result of poor survey work and a lack of understanding of local social and political processes. By living amongst the community even the silent are heard. The participatory nature of PRA also aims to be inclusive of other voices. When refugee leaders listened to the contributions of fellow refugees they were often surprised by their abilities. But even when PRA is used with pre-selected groups there is scope for domination. The skill of the facilitator to redirect, and record, dominant voices is critical in interpreting the outcomes.

Tyler (1986) argues that it is the said and unsaid together that create meaning. PRA builds on the recognition that social meaning may be created through visual as much as verbal forms. Visual representations offer a way to report the unsaid. Concepts of illness were more readily portrayed in maps of the body than through verbal discussion alone. Social maps were produced with amazing accuracy. Daily experience of the distribution of vegetables made the process of matrix ranking accessible to women.

Yet, visual methods alone did not produce an understanding. Interpretation, through probing and facilitating discussion, as well as locating those who spoke, was critical in understanding these representations.

Although PRA activities brought people together to participate in the research, the heterogeneity of the population meant that rarely was one form of representation shared by all. This form of representing knowledge varied according to who participated in or facilitated exercises. For example, educated school students often imposed categories on the people whose voice they claimed to represent through their desire for westernised 'scientific' diagrams (Box 1). Some leaders

would consider it 'backward' to use local categories. If the voices of the educated or the leaders dominated when information was presented, data would be preserved in alien categories or mathematical diagrams.

Developing the skills to observe, as well as record and intervene appropriately, was an important part of the research process. It enabled facilitators to situate the various positions of those who spoke and to recognise some of the motives behind what was said (Box 2).

### BOX 1

Early in the training of the students one group returned proudly with a neatly copied chart of their work. They were proud to claim that they had listened to a group of illiterate women who were not part of any of the formal programmes in the camp and whose voice they felt was often lost. Yet when they displayed the diagram not only was it in neat bar chart form but the categories were those of the Western calendar. We discussed the issue and it materialised that the women had spoken of wet and dry seasons with no relation to months in the Nepali or European year and they had regrouped different symbols to represent quantity. The children had reinterpreted it into the 'school style' that held prestige (fieldnotes).

### BOX 2

After two months of weekly PRA sessions the facilitators had become aware of the need to record all kinds of behaviour to gain an understanding beyond the generalised picture. Those who had used tape recorders to capture individual positions had become more confident about the usefulness of doing so and the validity of the results this produced. Pingala in particular had become good at spotting the common 'official' position that the community could provide if they were unsure of the motives of the group - or not interested in putting their energy into the exercise. This ability to distinguish between the responses that community members were providing was vital in knowing how to further analyse the data (fieldnotes).

Living in the camp, I got to know many people well. For the majority of the 80,000 refugees, however, my status as an 'outsider' influenced

what they presented in PRA exercises. As a result, I confined my participation to groups of people I knew. The local (Nepali) researchers had less of an 'officialising' impact but it was the refugee school students who were the most successful in developing an understanding through participant observation. They were unthreatening members of the community. It was socially acceptable for them to be inquisitive and even challenging when they felt answers were not 'transparent' or complete. Using their own knowledge of the community, the students would detect and address inconsistencies in what people said to them. The 'outsider story' could be exposed during pre-diagramming discussions. As time progressed and people came to know 'what we knew' it would be they who challenged the newer arrivals or onlookers who presented the 'official story'!

### Public and private spaces

PRA activities were essentially public events. Survey interviews, in contrast, were held in the private space of the household. Interestingly, people found open conversation in public space easier than in the 'private' forum of their own crowded home. Women could delegate childcare and domestic responsibilities to relations so that they could join in discussions freely. Private group space allowed people to feel more in control of the issues discussed and to talk in general terms, rather than about themselves.

Even people in the neighbourhood seemed uncomfortable discussing certain issues when responses related to their household, even though they knew I was aware of their activities as I lived amongst them. Questionnaires used in these 'private' spaces yielded results of low validity.

*"It was often not until later that I realised the extent that women didn't like to speak openly at home. 'Politeness' demanded a response. If the question is not within their knowledge the respondent doesn't feel confident like if they are worried that they should tell the 'refugee rules' and not the reality. In the camp, someone is always listening"* (Jamuna Nepal, interviewer).

### Questions of validity

The community clearly knew and could represent accurately trends of population and behaviour. A detailed social map in one of the sectors came close to agency statistics on literacy. PRA activities also offered insights beyond 'official statistics' and exposed the low validity of data gathered by questionnaires alone. The results of the research show that the continued insistence on costly statistical analysis is unfounded. For example, whilst the official surveys illustrated the illnesses that people took to the health centres, PRA revealed the prevalence of deficiency diseases that the community treated in the private domain. This process produced enough data to highlight and address *beri-beri* as a serious health problem months before official action was taken.

Participatory activities were not only quicker, but engaged people more. As Sunkeshra observed, *"the questionnaires consist only of questioning and answering so it is not enjoyable like PRA"*. Where refugees felt that the questions had no relevance to their lives, they rarely clarified or elaborated their answers but instead said *"what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear"*. Agency workers were perceived to have a 'busy schedule' and 'no time to talk'. This belief commonly resulted in feelings of exclusion and resentment. Bishnu Maya, who was interviewed, later admitted: *"It's two years now, people come into my house and ask so many questions. But nothing ever happens. So now I just give a quick answer to let them go away"* (quoted in Damini's diary).

Survey questions are often interpreted in different ways by respondents. PRA activities and participant observation, on the other hand, provide ways to correct conceptual confusions arising from different interpretations of verbal questions. In PRA categories were discussed and agreed on as part of the process, so they were as close as possible to indigenous categories and jointly understood. In one instance, questionnaire data showed that less than 20% of the population were using traditional healers. Observation indicated that the Western medical system is often used as a second option. By using a timeline, a group of

school children indicated how facilities were prioritised over a period of time. But when they were asked the exact questionnaire question, the health centres dominated. On discussion, it materialised that they thought the question only related to where people went in the public formal sector.

Conversations prior to PRA activities gave participants the option of defining the question and influencing the means of representing the information. This did more than ensure data validity. As one of the participants observed:

*"When we were conducting the PRA exercise about illness and "where do we go to get cured" we were many women together. The two facilitators had explained about the work and we had been together for many weeks. We all discussed what we meant and then we answered honestly and gave the other women confidence to speak out to say the truth."* (fieldnotes).

Transparency of the aims and objectives of the research was vital in this process. Once they were involved in the process of research, the refugees were able to show the significance of their history and culture. They felt in control of what was being 'sought' in an attempt to understand. PRA provided a forum in which people had the confidence to speak their mind without presenting the 'agency appeasing' or 'intellectually acceptable' view. If people had had prior experience of taking part in PRA exercises, subsequent survey interviews showed a marked positive 'PRA exposure' effect on their openness and willingness to discuss details.

#### • **PRA and participant observation**

There were some aspects of people's lives that neither PRA nor surveys could adequately make sense of. Participant observation thus formed a vital complement to the use of PRA, providing important insights and richness of understanding. It was only through observation, for example, that I could begin to understand the processes people followed when seeking a cure. No verbal or visual 'reason' was available.

The kind of rapport that close, day-to-day living in communities facilitates creates a deeper level of understanding about people's lives and the relationships between them. One incident took place, however, that reminded me of the wider social context in which my friendships with people were set (Box 3).

#### BOX 3

A group of camp leaders gathered in the privacy of the camp committee room for discussions on caste. I had assumed that this room was suitably private. However, during discussions other 'important' refugees wandered in, as was the norm. What had been an appropriate discussion with friends in my room was inappropriate in this more public arena.

Introductions and pre-PRA discussion began in a lively atmosphere of trust. The topic of caste was raised and immediately an onlooker who had joined the group objected. His status meant that no one spoke out. I was unknown to him. My motive, gathering knowledge for academic purposes, was not believed. A hidden agenda was feared. The session was redirected to mapping the districts from which people originated to diffuse tension.

Only later did I see why the question of caste was perceived as a threat. Bilateral government talks had concluded with a decision to reclassify the refugees into distinct groups, only some of whom would be eligible for repatriation. The PRA process was too close to the process of government classification. In all spheres they wanted to be portrayed as the single group: 'the Bhutanese'.

This incident was detrimental to further public displays of trust from friends, for fear of being seen to give confidential information to 'outside officials'.

On this occasion, I had confused the distinction between the easy rapport of friends and the formal PRA setting. They too had not apparently anticipated the problem. PRA is by its nature 'open'. Indeed, this is one of its unique characteristics. But the assumption that rapport built up with individual members would allow for discussion of sensitive issues in a larger forum was mistaken. The open public forum changed the nature of the event. These limitations should have been clear, but

people had discussed other 'sensitive' topics openly before in such spaces.

Group size, location, time and the personalities involved all determine the acceptability of a topic. It is the rule of a single objector not the majority that dominates. Disclosure may be governed more by rules of hierarchy than the desire to inform. This incident not only raises issues of context, appropriateness and local power relations. It also highlights responsibilities held by the researcher.

## • Conclusion

This work has shown that PRA and anthropology could be of mutual benefit. Without careful training in skills of observing and recording processes, the complex social interactions that take place within PRA exercises can easily be overlooked. When time is short, often the first element to be dropped is observation of process, with problematic implications for interpretation. When time is taken to build rapport, some of the biases of fieldworkers can be addressed. Yet their own part in these processes requires a level of critical self-awareness that enables them to reflect on the impact of their own presence and perspectives. Their understanding of local socio-political contexts, their own socio-economic background and their culture, their academic training and their ability to perceive the interactions that are taking place in PRA exercises are difficult to disentangle from the understandings they gain from PRA exercises.

The assumption by those in power (both local and foreign) that 'scientific' experts know best is the biggest challenge to the appropriate application of participatory approaches. But other challenges come from the scaling up of 'people-centred' and participatory approaches. A recent UNHCR framework for People-Oriented Planning (POP) recommends a series of analyses to determine a refugee profile and context analysis (Anderson *et al.*, 1992). Little methodological advice is given. In the refugee context, PRA has the potential to address POP's concerns. But without the level of detailed process documentation and reflexivity that participant observation offers, PRA can become little more than a visual questionnaire that jeopardises claims both to rigour and to

interpretive advantage over questionnaire surveys.

Lessons from PRA can equally contribute to anthropology. Wright and Nelson (1995) contend that for anthropology, change "*is variously denied or treated as an incidental outcome*". The world of the refugees did not accommodate anthropologists who wished only to observe, record and leave. Association with Oxfam and the possibility of manipulated 'shared interests' brought the fear of the 'awkward relationship' scenario. But this fear often over-rides the very real fact that change is frequently initiated by local people themselves. Do anthropologists have the 'right' to silently censor the communities' part in research because we as 'outsiders' think we know better? For anthropologists, the visual tools, techniques for building rapport and, above all, the involvement of people in producing and analysing their own information, offer exciting ways to meet some of the challenges of applied action-oriented anthropology.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge all those who supported my research, and my funding bodies, The Frederick Williamson Memorial Fund, Trinity Hall, William Wyse Fund and Oxfam, Nepal.

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