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Creating equitable spaces in research partnerships across Majority and Minority World

Loritta Chan¹

Abstract

This paper draws on the experiences of a project between Majority and Minority worlds, which involves engaging young people in advisory and co-researcher capacities to understand the livelihoods challenges faced by young people in cities. Focusing on youth engagement groups and ethics procedures, this paper is a critical reflection on doing research in the Majority World, and how it disrupts existing knowledge practices and assumptions.

Keywords

Youth engagement groups; Decolonising research; Ethics.

Criando parcerias equitativas de pesquisa entre Países Majoritários e Minoritários

Resumo

O artigo baseia-se nas experiências de um projeto de pesquisa realizado em parceria entre Países Majoritários e Minoritários, com a participação de jovens na realização de atividades como consultores e pesquisadores. O objetivo do projeto era analisar os desafios enfrentados pelos jovens em relação à inserção produtiva em contextos urbanos. O foco do artigo são as ações dos grupos consultivos formados por jovens e os procedimentos éticos em pesquisa. É uma reflexão crítica sobre a realização de pesquisa em Países Majoritários e como essa experiência desconstrói conhecimentos e práticas pré-existentes.

Palavras-chave

Grupo Consultivo Jovem; Descolonizando metodologias de pesquisa; Ética.

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Introduction

Amidst a prevalence of international research collaborations between Majority and Minority World contexts over the past decades, it has become ever more important to reflect on the gaps, inequalities and power differences that exist within these partnerships. As we become more mindful of these issues, the way we do research continues to change, from our research methodologies to conceptual frameworks.

The use of the terms, Majority and Minority Worlds for example, rather than Global South/Third World/Developing countries and Global North/First World/Developed countries, is a recognition of the fact that the majority of the world's population resides in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is also – and more importantly – an awareness of unequal global power relations, and how discourses and concepts that are often privileged and homogenised – such as definitions and understandings of childhoods, or research and ethics procedures – tend to apply only to a minority of contexts (PUNCH, 2016). Nowadays, academics and practitioners are also actively finding ways to decolonise research and knowledge by reflecting on assumptions, knowledges and practices that may be imposing, inequitable, and are not always translatable in other contexts. One approach to negotiate these issues of power dynamics and inequalities has been through participatory research methods, particularly in studies with children and young people. The active engagement of children and young people in co-producing research together is to argue and shed light on the significant contributions that they can make towards generating new knowledge and methodologies.

However, do these practices suffice when it comes to decolonising research practices, “decentering dominant, northern centric models of childhood [and young people], and using southern epistemologies” (ABE-BE, DAR & LISÅ, 2022, p.255)? What more is needed? When it comes to collaborations between (1) Majority and Minority world contexts, (2) between actors across academia, policy and practice, and (3) between

adult facilitators, and children and young people, what are some of the complexities and nuances that we should also be meditating on?

In light of these questions, this paper draws on the experiences from a research project, *Shaping Youth Futures* that was funded by the British Academy (YF\190041)². The project, which lasted for 2.5 years, was an international collaboration between partners from Majority and Minority world contexts, and across universities, community organisations and research institutes. It involved engaging young people in Mumbai (India) and Volta Redonda (Brazil), in advisory and co-researcher capacities to understand the issues and challenges surrounding young people's livelihoods in cities. These young people are also self-identified youth activists and protagonists, where they are dedicated towards supporting rights of young people, and improving the lives of their communities and their environments they live in. While the project team were experienced in working with children and young people, and in advisory capacities, there were nonetheless several challenges, such as the impacts of Covid-19, the complexities of cross-country research with language barriers and time differences, as well as recognising the other commitments which the young people also had to balance, such as work, studies, and household commitments when family members fell sick during Covid-19.

Through experiences and observations during this project, this paper highlights the need for a centering practice around people and individuals as we think about (1) the fluidities of research methodologies – such as youth advisory models – that evolve and adapt according to local geographies and contexts, and (2) recognise the situatedness of ethics that leads to power imbalances and inequalities.

Embracing fluidities in youth engagement models

When this project was first conceptualised, the research team had a distinct Youth Expert Group (YEG) advisory model in mind with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Drawing from the experiences of

studies where youth advisory models were adopted (e.g. HEFFERNAN ET AL. (2017); CLUVER et al. (2020), the idea was that a group of 5 to 6 young people would work together with adult facilitators on the project scope, and serve as mentors and advisors in youth-led research projects. YEGs would also facilitate trainings, research dissemination and take part in knowledge exchange events. However, as the project developed in India and Brazil, the roles and responsibilities of YEGs evolved according to local contexts and group dynamics, allowing us to realise the realities and constant adaptations that are needed when translating conceptual models into action.

In India and Brazil, the initial recruitment processes differed. Our research partner in Brazil, CIESPI/PUC-Rio³ reached out to nine young people from the Youth Forum Sul Fluminense in Action (FJSFA)⁴, who they had closely worked with in previous projects. Through a voting process amongst themselves, the nine young people nominated five individuals who would form part of the YEG group. In the case of India, our research partner, YUVA⁵ invited one representative from each of the 19 youth collectives that they work with across Mumbai. Following a three-day workshop on livelihoods, research methodologies and ways of conducting a policy analysis, similar to Brazil, the young people elected six representatives amongst themselves to become YEG members. One of them withdrew, which led to five members remaining. Adult facilitators were not involved in these selections, and only suggested a consideration of diversity of gender, age, race, class and sexual orientation.

While there were similar recruitment processes across India and Brazil, the roles and responsibilities of YEGs diverged separately and organically according to their own contexts and group dynamics. In India, YEG members worked together with adult facilitators in the training sessions for their peers, and also took part in two online cross-country meetings, which was an opportunity to share findings and learn from each other. They also acted as intermediaries between

adult facilitators and the group of young researchers, and mentored designated young people in their individual research projects, from the research proposal, to data analysis and research dissemination. However, in Brazil, the differences between YEG members and young researchers were less clearly defined. YEG members in Brazil took part in the international meetings, and took a leadership role in planning training sessions for their peers on topics of job inclusion and youth protagonism in Brazil. However, there were no distinct mentorship roles. Instead, YEG members expressed that they wished to make decisions together with the other young co-researchers as a larger group, and to organise responsibilities amongst themselves. This was because in their involvement in the FJSFA, they functioned collectively, and wished to maintain this format and inclusive, communicative transparency. Leadership roles emerged organically overtime, and interestingly, the most involved young person who took on leadership roles was not an originally elected YEG member. This observation particularly showcases the fluidities of roles within YEGs, as well as the model itself. Responsibilities and the nature of the YEG model are adapted according to the context which it is situated in, and negotiated between the people. Rather than placing a model on a group of young people, they decide what model works best for them.

What became apparent overtime, was how much young people's experiences with youth activism, had shaped the project. Their dedication towards youth activism imbued them with a political awareness, and strong commitment towards rights, inclusion and participation. In their activism work, the young people were particularly committed to creating just and equitable spaces where all children and young people can participate, make changes to society and have their voices heard and respected. Creating an inclusive space was also about embracing and respecting the diversity of age, gender and socio-cultural differences (EVANS & HOLT, 2011; CUEVAS-PARRA, 2022). The young people brought these experiences and passions to

the project as well, which helped nurture an environment of critical reflexivity and mindfulness, not just amongst the young people themselves, but also the adult facilitators too. In Brazil for example, the young people recognised that they all had different experiences with youth activism, where some had more, and others had less. The more experienced members were conscious of this and would 'police' themselves to support and give more opportunities to less experienced individuals. When conducting interviews for the youth-led research projects, they would also ensure that the opinions they expressed were what they had collectively agreed on beforehand.

Along this same thread, adult facilitators on the project team also found themselves in an ongoing reflection on their roles, and what it means to facilitate in an equitable, unimposing way. Ageism and prejudices towards young people were one of the salient issues that young people in India and Brazil often face in society. While main public bodies and nongovernmental organisations may acknowledge the importance of listening to young people, they do not necessarily encourage active participation – which was a reinforced finding that came out of the young people's projects. Adult facilitators were attentive of this. It was a delicate dance of ensuring not to impose or intervene too much, whilst providing young people with the analytical tools and overarching conceptual frameworks on livelihoods, that could support them in their research projects. One of the YEG members in India mentioned that adult facilitators were important as they could turn to them for knowledge, support and encouragement at times when they felt inadequate to mentor their peers.

While frameworks and engagement models may be neatly conceptualised at the beginning, as this section shows, they change and morph according to the local contexts, the group composition and dynamics. It is important to recognise that it is the people involved that animate and bring shape to these advisory models and participatory research methodologies. Individuals bring in their respective

experiences – in this case, the young people with their work in youth activism – which influences the nature, the relationships and dynamics of the project. As such, the respective fluidities, new sensitivities and adaptations with these youth advisory models across different cultures and geographies, becomes a rich learning experience each time (see Krishnamurthy et al. (forthcoming)).

Reflecting on ethics procedures

Another experience from this project, that invited a critical reflection on doing research in the Majority World, was the issue of ethics procedures (paper forthcoming on this topic in the project). One of the main challenges we encountered was the dissonances between institutional ethics procedures, and on-the-ground practices. While the former may be well-intended, it can be at odds with cultural understandings and lead to practices that are not necessarily equitable or ethical. Ethical guidelines are not made in a vacuum and are developed in Minority World contexts (ABEBE & BESSELL, 2014). As Assellin & Doiron (2016) note, institutional ethics procedures in the Minority World privileges certain research paradigms and ethical practices that dismiss local values, principles and practices – and more broadly, the rich complexities, pluralisms and multiplicities of ethics in different contexts and settings. When upholding the three pillars of respect, justice and benefit (KING, 2021) that underpins ethical research, it is important to critically reflect on the situatedness of ethics to avoid power imbalances and inequitable research partnerships.

These guidelines developed in Minority World contexts produce particular spaces and outcomes, which may not be translatable and applicable in other sociocultural contexts (ABEBE & BESSELL, 2014). In that sense, the nature of institutional ethics procedures in the Minority World can impose assumptions, privileging certain research paradigms and being ignorant of local values, principles and practices (ASSELLIN & DOIRON, 2016). Ethics committees are not only situated far away from

the field, but furthermore, it is problematic for children and young people involved in participatory research in the Majority World, to adhere to Minority World practices (ABEBE, 2009). Reflecting on his fieldwork with young children in Ethiopia, Abebe (2009) shares there should be a “moral consideration grounded in respect for local, gendered and socio-spatial constructions of childhood, as well as the need to go beyond acknowledging such complexities to ask how moral and ethical spaces are re-produced and who they actually serve” (ABEBE, 2009, p.493). Returning to the three pillars of respect, justice and benefit, (KING, 2021) suggests building upon the principles of care that respects and acknowledges identities, relationships and experiences. Particularly in research involving different age groups and different sociocultural contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge the situatedness and particularities of ethics to avoid power disparities and unethical relationships.

One of the challenges that we encountered on this issue, was the lack of equitable spaces for community practitioners in conversations around ethics practices and procedures. As this project took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, there were tussles with institutional ethics procedures, where ethics committees situated far from the field sites predominantly determined whether data collection should proceed, rather than in conversation with local community practitioners who have had many years of working together with young people, and also had a better benchmark of on-the-ground health and safety issues. With the privileging of ethics procedures in firstly Minority contexts, and secondly, academic institutions, these power imbalances and dismissals of ethics-in-practice experiences highlighted the necessity to critically reflect on the role of institutional ethics procedures. It is not to be mistaken that institutional ethics procedures are a foe, but rather, it is to consider how we can create conversational spaces that recognises and brings together different knowledges and practices in conducting ethical research, so that international partnerships can be genuinely equitable.

Conclusion

The reflections in this paper reminds us of the need for a centering practice around people and their experiences, and an acknowledgement of how they animate, shape, disrupt and reconfigure the knowledges, research methodologies and ethical practices that we know. This is not only limited to dominating discourses and practices set in Minority World that are not always translatable in other contexts, such as definitions and understandings of children and young people's lives, or how ethics and informed consent is practiced and adapted on the field in different socio-spatial contexts. But also, this reflection continues to be important and valid in our journey of decolonising research practices. Even as we adopt participatory methodologies – in this case, youth engagement groups – our experiences show us the seemingly messy realities of putting concept into action, in fact contains a richness in experiences and learnings when these youth engagement models adapt and evolve organically according to local geographies, and the experiences of young people. Similarly, this centering practice around people should also be considered in ethical procedures and practices that underpin every research project. When institutional ethical procedures are at odds with cultural understandings and on-the-ground practices of ethics, it leads to a greater conversation on how we can bring together different knowledges and practices in ethics across geographies, and across academia, community practitioners and young people. By critically reflecting on the complexities and nuances of these issues, it is hoped that we can continue to create genuinely inclusive, ethical partnerships and spaces.

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Notes

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- 3 International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI), in association with the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (<https://www.ciespi.org.br/>)
- 4 The FJSFA works with the Children's Rights Council in Brazil, and involves working together with children and young people in supporting their rights, and improving the spaces they live in.
- 5 Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action, India (<https://yuvaindia.org/>)

