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THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AS A "MINGA": CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF A NEW METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH BASED ON CO-DETERMINATION AND RECIPROCITY

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Abstract

This paper presents a new methodological approach, entitled "MINGA", developed with the goal of achieving a more equitable working relationship between the researcher and her/his research subjects while also reaching a deeper understanding of the reality being researched. The question of what type of representations we produce as researchers, and with what consequences, has been addressed for some time now by post-colonial and feminist academics. Such critiques have been valuable in highlighting the need to generate new research practices that go beyond representation as the sole domain of researchers, and have thus contributed to "decolonizing" research methods. At the same time have there have been more efforts to theorize than to developing and implementing critical and collaborative methodologies. MINGA proposes a new approach, consisting of establishing research partnerships with the studied subjects, which are oriented by the principles of co-determination and reciprocity. The term MINGA was chosen to highlight parallels with the ancestral practice of "minga", dating back to Inca times, of the collective production of goods for the benefit of the community, without monetary exchange and on the basis of reciprocity. The methodology MINGA is therefore a form of co-production of knowledge where the mutual benefit is the expansion of the social and cultural capital of all of the research partners. Developing such methodologies requires first an exhaustive and critical reflection on the barriers that are to be overcome to create more egalitarian research relationships. Because few efforts have been made to identify them and think about how they could be dismantled, these barriers still remain invisible to some academics. After outlining a typology of such barriers, the article describes the guiding principles of the MINGA methodology. It ends by discussing the challenges and potentials of this new methodological approach.

INTRODUCTION

The link between knowledge production and power relations has preoccupied academics for some time now. Human geographers have become increasingly concerned with the epistemological questions raised by feminist and post-colonial critics of the "scientific" method, which question the (unequal) relations of power between the researcher and her/his subjects (McDowell 1992). Feminists have argued that modern Western culture has seen the production of knowledge as a means to gain power through not only gaining greater control over nature and life itself, but also over the lives of others (Jaggar 2008:414). As such, knowledge production in the social sciences has often been linked to aspirations to control the social world and has also been seen as an integral part of colonial projects (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2003). This last point is also addressed by post-colonial critics, who question the way writers and researchers represent the "other" as an object of study. Said (1978), for example, shows that in the writings of several European authors the "Orient" is represented as an irrational and backward world, which helped to shape the social fantasy of the racial superiority of Europeans. Spivak (1985) likewise shows how in the work of some European intellectuals the colonized subject or 'subaltern', in particular women, are represented as incapable of thinking for themselves and always requiring mediation and representation by the "first world intellectual." Writers such as Mohanty (1991) and Escobar (1994) have also reflected critically on the knowledge production process that prevails in Western academic institutions: who produces knowledge about the "other" being researched? From what perspective, and from what spaces? For Mohanty (1991), feminist literature has represented "third world" women homogeneously as having little education, great material needs, and as victims of patriarchal domination. This is in contrast with Western intellectuals, who are characterized by their enlightenment, autonomy and emancipation. In this way intellectuals exercise a power of representation that creates differences and hierarchies between "third world women" and "first world women", and between "underdeveloped countries" and "developed countries". Creating these differences allows the Western world to adopt a paternalistic attitude towards the inhabitants of "underdeveloped countries" and perpetuates the idea of the superiority of Western intellectuals and the need for the First World to protect the fragile "other" in need of help.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in research on recent female migration to Europe. Writing on women from Asia, Africa and Latin America that migrate to European countries has often represented the "migrant woman" as lacking material and educational resources and as a victim of global structures of exploitation and therefore in need of the protection of European intellectuals and social services (Riaño 2007). In this way it denies women from non-European countries the opportunity to participate in the process of scientific production, for it is assumed that they would not have the resources to participate in such an analytic process. As a consequence, the impacts and implications of scientific research for "researchers" and the "researched" are unequal. While researchers control the type of representation of the "other" that guides their academic work, and also gain institutional and social power through the publication of their research, the "researched" do not manage to be part of a process that contributes to their social and individual empowerment. Human geographers have thus called for « critical » methodologies that engage to a greater degree in the development of non-hierarchical knowledges and the empowerment of marginalized social groups (Kitchin & Hubbard 1999, Smith 2001, Pain & Francis 2003, Pain 2004). In the face of the unequal power of representation held by "researchers" and the "researched", several of us have been arguing for efforts to bridge that gap (Riaño 1995, Madge et al, 1997, Kobayashi 1999, Mountz 2002, Riaño & Baghdadi 2007a). For Freikamp et al (2008:7) such thoughts belong to a critical research that is oriented by different quality criteria than the uncritical traditional science. Critical approaches place the issue of the consequences and

the utility that research activities may have for the research subjects at the centre of its methodological preoccupations. The former scholars thus advocate for the development of critical methods that question the epistemological positions of traditional scientific approaches and recognise and try to overcome their limitations.

At this point it is important to note that while such critiques have been valuable in that they have highlighted the need to generate new research practices that go beyond representation as the sole domain of researchers, and have thus contributed to "decolonizing" research methods (Tuhiwai Smith 1999), specific efforts to generate new methodological approaches to achieve these objectives have been relatively few (McDowell 1992; Pain & Francis 2003). This paper aims to contribute to bridging this gap. This raises the question of what is meant by "equity" in the research process when we seek more egalitarian relations of the power of representation. In our definition, the concept refers to the process of achieving greater equality between "researchers" and the "researched" in regards to their ability to define and represent during the research process and to obtain mutually beneficial outcomes. While some feminist researchers have advocated the need to "democratize" research (Jaggar 2008), and yet others have highlighted the necessity of a "commitment to the field" (Sharp 2005:306), this article will use the concept of the "MINGA methodology" to indicate the search for approaches to knowledge production based on principles of co-determination and reciprocity. At this point is also important to clarify that although the term "co-determination" does exist in the English language, English speaking writers writing on "participatory" (e.g. Mohan 1999, Pain 2004, Bergold & Thomas 2012) or "collaborative" (e.g. Sharp 2005) methods have not used it. Co-determination is used here to emphasize the research partnerships between persons within and outside academia to jointly produce knowledge. Reciprocity is understood as a collective learning process for all research partners. MINGA is therefore to be understood as a methodology towards more equality in the power of scientific representation as well as a means of gaining deeper research insight and a more adequate interpretation of research results.

This article is structured in three parts. The first is a reflection aimed at identifying the different types of barriers that stand in the way of equity, with some guidance as to how they could be overcome. The second part presents the principles of the MINGA methodology, which was developed in the context of a research project led by the author with women from countries in Latin America, Southeast Europe and the Middle East who migrated to Switzerland for reasons of family reunification or political asylum. The third part is a reflection on the challenges and potential of the MINGA methodology. The conclusion raises the question of what is to be learned from this new methodological approach.

1. IDENTIFYING AND BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO EQUITY

While it is clear that there is a need to strive to conduct research based on the principles of co-determination and reciprocity, the question is how can we concretely achieve and implement these in the research process? The challenge of creating more egalitarian research relationships requires first of all reflection on the barriers to achieving this goal. Despite the continued presence of barriers to equity these are often invisible, given that academics generally do not reflect critically on the type of relationship that should exist between researchers and the researched, on the purpose of the research, and on where knowledge is produced. The purpose of this section is therefore to offer a reflection that makes visible the different types of barriers that stand in the way of equity and to outline specific ways they could be overcome. I have identified the following six types of barriers:

TABLE 1. BARRIERS TO EQUITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

1. Barriers of imaginaries
The characterization of the researcher as an "expert" and the researched as lacking autonomy
2. Barriers of social hierarchy
These start with the naming of "researcher" and "researched"
3. Barriers to communicative exchange
Having to limit oneself to reporting with no possibility of communicative exchange
4. Barriers in the power of definition
The absence of co-determination in the definition of research goals and categories of analysis and interpretation
5. Barriers to mutual learning
The disparity between the research participants regarding the expansion of their knowledge
6. Spatial barriers
The separation between "researcher" and "researched" begins with the places chosen for meetings

1.1 BARRIERS OF IMAGINARIES

How do we imagine the "other" who we are going to investigate? As explained in the introduction, the focus and topics of our research often produce a homogenous vision of the "other", without emphasizing the differences within a group. This is sometimes done from an ethnocentric perspective that places men and women from the "Orient" (Said 1978), "Third World" (Mohanty 1991) the Balkan Peninsula (Redepenning 2002), the Muslim world and/or indigenous world (Tuhiwai Smith 1999) as "backwards", as characterized by violent actions, as victims of (patriarchal) structures of exploitation and/or as having little autonomy to act. These types of geographic imaginaries lead to the creation of research practices in which researchers from "developed" countries are seen as more advanced and as a legitimate producer of knowledge about the other.

How can we confront these barriers of imaginaries? A critical attitude towards how the researcher sees and constructs the other is an essential step for "decolonizing" research methods. This reflection must necessarily be guided by the search for differences within the places/phenomena being researched, rather than trying to produce a homogeneous and monolithic image of them. At the same time it is necessary to try and uncover the strategies and potential of the people being researched, and not focus only on showing their weaknesses and limitations. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) therefore advocates a critical attitude towards the assumptions, values and categories that a research project is based on. This means a critical attitude towards the ways and forms of representing the "other" and asking how much they are included or excluded from the research process.

1.2   BARRIERS OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Another barrier to equity begins with the process of differentiation that is established in academia when one uses the terms "researcher" and "researched." These terms are used without much reflection, though in practice they have the effect of construing the researched as "objects of study" and the researcher(s) as the only expert(s) that can legitimately produce knowledge. These terms create the frame of reference for the type of relationship that will exist between research participants. In this way is important to strive to use terms that connote the situation of equal status that is sought between participants in a process of knowledge production.

How can we break the barriers of social hierarchy? It is imperative to begin by recognizing that there are several types of knowledges and that there are different kinds of spaces where knowledge is produced. In this regard it is important to recognize that both the knowledge produced in academic spheres and that which is produced in the context of everyday practices are of value. While it is true that in the context of "development projects" much weight has been given in recent years to the integration of local knowledges, in many other academic contexts there is still a reluctance to consider the persons or populations studied as "experts". Recognizing the value of the knowledge acquired through everyday practice also means designing a research practice that seeks cooperation between groups or individuals who have different types of knowledge.

In this way we propose that the relationship forged between the "researcher" and the "researched" be likened to that of forming a corporation (for research purposes) where both parties are considered to be experts with different types of knowledge that work together as "research partners." The research thus becomes a collaborative project in which the research partners each offer knowledge and receive the mutual benefit of expanding their knowledge. This conception aims not only to achieve greater social justice, but also to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomena being researched through the combination of different types of knowledge.

1.3   BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATIVE EXCHANGE

These barriers arise in research practices where the populations studied are limited to providing information, without the possibility of a communicative exchange about the objectives of the analysis and the categories of interpretation and representation. In this way, the role of the "other" amounts merely to the task of reporting, without the possibility of a communicative interaction. The importance of communicative interaction has been highlighted for many years by authors such as Freire (1970) and Fals Borda (1998), who understand research to be a dialogical process. Here we argue that it is necessary to break the barriers to communicative interaction by developing methods that allow for a systematic exchange of knowledge between all research partners. This will achieve three types of benefits for all of the parties involved in the research process: (a) the explicit inclusion of all types of knowledge, (b) the expansion of knowledge of each of the participants, and (c) the generation of a general knowledge that goes beyond the usual limits of understanding. Furthermore, several authors have argued that opening such communicative spaces requires offering the security to research participants that they can critically express their ideas and present their experiences without the fear of this having negative consequences for them (e.g. Bergold & Thomas 2012). Wicks und Reason (2009) point out that although trust prevails, communicative spaces are also necessarily paradoxical, as on-going processes of negotiation are a central feature.

1.4   BARRIERS IN THE POWER OF DEFINITION

In many current practices of knowledge production there is a lack of co-determination in the definition of research goals, approaches and categories of analysis. As such the power of definition lies exclusively in the hands of the researcher, creating a situation of inequality between the two parties involved in the research process. This inequality in the power of representation carries the risk of producing unilateral representations that do little to differentiate the people and places being researched.

1.5   BARRIERS TO MUTUAL LEARNING

The question of the utility of a research project for all of the participants, whether they are in a position of "researcher" or "researched," is of central importance. Usually it is assumed that the goal of the "researcher" is to improve the understanding of the people and places being researched, which should help to advance scientific knowledge in general. Research which is referred to as "applied" also seeks to help formulate policies to improve the situation of the persons being researched. In practice, however, there is inequality with respect to the utility of a research project. While researchers see the concrete results of their labour in the expansion of their knowledge and their own work advancement, the concrete utility that the "researched" receive is less clear, particularly in regards to the expansion of their knowledge. Is important therefore to ask how research practices and methods can lead to the mutual acquisition of new "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986), or knowledge.

1.6   SPATIAL BARRIERS

Barriers that separate the "researcher" from the "researched" are not only social but also spatial, given that they can begin with the place chosen for the production of knowledge. Usually the researcher collects data in the "field", i.e. places where the people being researched live or are active, and then takes the data to university spaces for later review and analysis. This spatial separation of the world where data is collected and the world where it is analysed reinforces inequalities between the "researcher" and the "researched." While the former achieve a thorough understanding of both the field and of academia, the latter is unable to advance their knowledge of academic sites, thus perpetuating the image of the university as an "ivory tower". How can we confront spatial barriers? The answer seems obvious, yet it is rarely done. If the "researched" are seen as partners in the production of knowledge, they would also have access to academics spaces, like universities, where the communicative exchange would take place. This "conquest" of academic spaces also serves a symbolic function of demystifying these spaces that are seen as inaccessible and characterizing them instead as joint work spaces - thereby dismantling the ivory tower.

2. THE MINGA METHODOLOGY: IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES OF CO-DETERMINATION AND RECIPROCITY

How can we concretely implement the principles outlined above? MINGA's aim is to develop a new methodological approach that allows for the implementation of the principles of co-determination and reciprocity. MINGA was initiated and developed by Yvonne Riaño and Nadia Baghdadi in the context of a research project on the experiences of migrant women when trying to gain access to the Swiss labour market (Riaño and Baghdadi 2007a, Riaño et al 2008, Riaño 2011, Baghdadi 2012). The case study focuses on women from countries in Latin America, Southeast Europe and the Middle East who have vocational training or tertiary education, and migrated to Switzerland for reasons of work, family reunification or political asylum. The public image that prevails in Switzerland of migrant women, especially those coming from non-EU countries, has been based on a vision that homogenizes them as people who have been forced to migrate by economic poverty, and as lacking personal resources, education and culture. The reality is quite different. In Switzerland there are a wide variety of situations in regards to both the reasons and forms of migration and to the legal status and level of social and economic integration of migrant women. Unfortunately, many of the studies carried out in Switzerland and other European countries offer far from a complete and differentiated view of the variety of situations of female migrants (Riaño & Baghdadi 2007b). Also, researchers working on migration issues in Europe have given little attention to the critical issue of the unequal power of scientific representation that prevails between academics and migrant groups. The aim of the research presented here was therefore, on the one hand, to produce a differentiated picture of the variety of reasons for migration and of the strategies for entering the labour market of non-EU migrant women in Switzerland. On the other hand, it was to develop a critical and collaborative methodology for migration studies based on the principles of co-determination and reciprocity.

The new methodological approach produced for this project was named MINGA to highlight the parallels between our objectives of jointly constructing knowledge in reciprocal ways and the ancient practice of "minka" (Quechua) or "minga", a pre-Columbian practice of collective work in which there is no economic exchange but which is instead done for the purpose of mutual benefit. In Andean countries, a minga can have different types of social utility such as, for example the construction of public infrastructure for a community or the support of a particular person or family, for the harvest of their agricultural products or the building their home.

How was the MINGA methodology carried out and what is it exactly? The main objectives of the methodology were (a) the co-production of knowledge, (b) reflection on one's own situation of professional integration, (c) the expansion of knowledge and feedback for all participants, and (d) the creation of social networks and motivation for personal action. MINGA thus transforms research into a collaborative project. The first step was to look for possible research partners to undertake the project. We designed a pamphlet explaining to potential research partners the objectives and the mutual benefits that the project aimed to achieve (understood as a specification of the "contract of usefulness"). The project was presented to two associations of migrants, the migrant women's association in the canton of Aargau ("Migrantinnenraum Aargau") and the feminist peace organization "cfd" in Bern, both of which agreed to pursue such a cooperative project.

The search process led to a total of 57 women participating in the project. Given that collaborative research projects represent in practice a complex process of communicative interaction, we sought to establish a work structure that allowed for a clear, organized and coherent exchange of communication. The MINGA methodology therefore consists of three main steps: (a) workshops to produce knowledge about barriers and resources, (b) deepening the reflection in individual conversations, and (c) workshops for critical analysis of research results.

Step 1: Workshops to produce knowledge about barriers and resources
The first step was to conduct workshops in small groups of 5 to 6 women in order to produce knowledge about the barriers they encounter and the resources at their disposal to achieve their professional integration in Switzerland. The workshops were day long and were organized by the two initiators of the research process (Yvonne Riaño and Nadia Baghdadi), along with a representative of the group of migrant women (Cristina Gutzwiler), and a representative of the organization cfd (Alicia Gamboa). The workshops were preceded by an exchange between the group of 5 to 6 participants regarding research goals, the definition of key concepts, and the analytical perspective. In this way agreement was reached on the goals that could be achieved through these workshops, on the definition of "integration", and on the perspective of analysis which, it was agreed, should include both individual factors and those related to society in general and its institutions.

FIG. 1 STEP 1: MINGA WORKSHOPS FOR THE PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF BIOGRAPHIES OF PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION[1]

The aim of the MINGA workshops was to go beyond the mere extraction of information, as is usual in the method of "focus groups", and to seek instead an expansion of the knowledge of all participants. The workshops were designed so as to allow for both the telling of each woman's story of professional integration and for the collective analysis of the individual experiences. Each woman's first detailed her experiences of migration and professional employment (a few weeks before the workshop each woman received a general guide for structuring their narrative which they could transform and supplement). The group then reflected on the type of barriers they had faced and the resources they had to address these barriers. In this way, not only did the women 'share their stories' but they also participated in the analysis of their own experiences and those of the other women participants.

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[1] Permission has been obtained for the publication of these pictures

Each of the participants was thus able to put their own professional biography in a comparative context, and expand their knowledge about their own path and the paths followed by others, thereby expanding their cultural capital. The workshops also strengthened the social capital of all participants since the work exchange helped women active in both academia and other areas of society to get closer and know each other better. So as to break down spatial barriers, MINGA workshops were conducted both in the seminar rooms of the Department of Human Geography at the University of Bern and in the meeting rooms of the migrant women's organizations (*cfd*, *Migrantinnenraum Aargau* and *CEDAP)*. In total 10 workshops were held, in which 57 women participated. These were held in the cities of Berne, Aargau and Zurich.

Step 2: Deepening reflection in individual conversations
The goal of the second step was to deepen the analysis of the individual biographies, while also addressing sensitive topics that had not been relevant to the discussion group. The initiators of the research held two person meetings with each of the participants. At the beginning of these meetings each of the two presented the topics they wanted to deepen their thinking on. These issues covered not only professional biographies but also individual biographies from childhood to the time of their migration to Switzerland. Then the initiators of the research took the role of asking questions and the other person proceeded to reflect and tell her story. At the end of the exchange the two parties analysed the topics covered. The results of this second phase were the expansion of the cultural capital of both participants (expanding their knowledge and understanding of migration and professional integration processes) and the strengthening of their social capital (this type of exchange allows for a closer connection and understanding between the two parties).

Step 3: Workshops for the critical analysis of research results
The steps detailed above generated a significant amount of information on the biographies of migration and professional integration of the women. What was the next step? How would we carry out the process of transcribing, summarizing and analysing the information? In the workshops it was agreed that the women who were the initiators of the research would be in charge of this process and then would make a formal presentation to all participants in which they would synthesize the main findings of the research and present their initial interpretations. An initial synthesis and analysis of results was presented in two half day workshops: one in the city of Bern (at the offices *cfd*, with 25 participants) and one in Zurich (at the offices of *CEDAP*, with 30 participants). Participants received a summary of the presentation a few days beforehand so as to have time to prepare comments. After the presentation the women broke in to subgroups, each of four people, to do the work of critical analysis. The results generated intense debate in these working groups. Later a representative of each subgroup presented the results of the analysis to all participants. The strongest critique focused on the typology proposed by the initiators of the research for the types of situations of integration into the labour market. It was argued that the types were not sufficiently differentiated. After a fruitful debate the research initiators proceeded to adapt and differentiate the results and the proposed typologies. How did the workshop end? At the end of the workshop a professional counsellor, contacted by the organizers of the project, presented the different institutional support networks for access to the Swiss labour market and offered advice.

The results from these workshops were numerous. On the one hand, a deeper understanding of reality was achieved thanks to the combination of several types of knowledge (academic, life skills), and on the other, the social and cultural capital of all participants was strengthened. Another important result of these workshops was that each woman received a work certificate from the University of Bern recognizing their work co-producing knowledge for this project. For Swiss employers it is very important to know that their future employees have Swiss experience and thus the certification was intended to support women with this need. In addition to the certificate each woman received

a folder containing the results of the first workshop (in the form of a summary table), the transcript of her personal biography, pictures from the workshops, the addresses of the participants in the workshops, and the addresses of institutions that support access to the Swiss labour market.

FIG. 2 STEP 3: MINGA WORKSHOPS FOR ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Step 4: Publication aimed at policy makers
The next step was to develop a booklet aimed at policy makers with the results of the investigation as agreed on in the final workshop, along with relevant recommendations. The booklet was officially launched at the University of Bern in a ceremony attended by about 100 people, including policy makers responsible for integration in several cantons, representatives of migrant organizations, migrant support NGOs, media representatives, academics, and the women who participated in the MINGA workshops. The publication was well received in the media and the newspaper *Der Bund,* one of the major papers of the city of Berne, published a full page on the results of the research. Afterwards members of the Swiss Green Party launched a petition to the Bern city council requesting actions to improve the situation of women migrants. As a result the Federal Office for Equality of Women and Men awarded funding to the organization *cfd* to conduct a mentorship project to support the integration of migrant women into the Swiss labour market. This project is currently being conducted in cooperation with the University of Bern through Yvonne Riaño.

F<small>IG.</small> 3 P<small>UBLICATION FOR INTEGRATION POLICY MAKERS BASED ON</small> MINGA
<small>WORKSHOPS</small>2

3. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE MINGA METHODOLOGY

As was seen in the previous section, the results achieved with the MINGA methodology are numerous: deepening of scientific knowledge through a combination of academic knowledge and that of everyday life, and expansion of the cultural and social capital of all participants. In this way the MINGA methodology is an approach that allows for the twin goals of producing a knowledge that is deeper and closer to the perceptions of the people studied than traditional methods, of reciprocal exchange through mutual learning and of having a concrete social impact in the lives of the research partners. How did women participants evaluate this methodology? Here are some examples of the assessments they made at the end of the last workshop[3]:

"*The MINGA workshops were an enriching experience for me. I am convinced that having shared my work experiences with other women in situations similar to my own helped me greatly to move past my fears and frustrations. That is why I feel stronger*" (Alejandra Amacher, Business Administrator, Mexico).

"*I really enjoyed sharing with other women who also have the experience of migration. Women struggled to tell their biographies, and reflect on them, and then make practical recommendations to improve their employment prospects. The work atmosphere was very comfortable. I was also glad to see some women who I had not seen for some time and to meet others* " (Cemyle Özkiran, social worker, Turkey).

"*The MINGA workshops were very fruitful for me. The analysis of my work life biography allowed me to better evaluate my professional priorities. My confidence in myself and my personal attitudes changed, very much for the better. In practice this means that I became more active in seeking contact with potential employers.*

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[2] Translation of title from the German: Skilled migrants and their potential for professional integration in Switzerland. Results and recommendations from a study funded by the National Research Program on Integration and Social Exclusion NFP 51

[3] Women's names have been anonymized

The result? I have been invited to interviews for jobs that match my skills. Is that not already a success? The energy we got to both feel and act stronger was amazing (Juliana Gygax, sociologist, Peru).

Despite its many possibilities and strengths is important to note that the MINGA methodology is quite complex and generates several *challenges*, presented below.

The scope of social action. While it is true that the MINGA methodology combines data collection with social action, it is necessary to recognize that the scope of the social action has its limits. As such, one of the challenges the initiators of the project faced were the critiques expressed by some of the participants in the workshop as to the impact of the methodology. One of them expressed her disappointment for she had hoped that the workshops would serve as the base for the formation of a political movement that would struggle to improve the situation of migrant women in Switzerland. Another woman expressed her dissatisfaction because she expected the initiators of the project to offer her a job at the university. Pain & Francis (2003:53) have argued that results such as those do not mean that the principles of collaboration are abandoned, but rather that "they are protected through more openness about the goals and impacts of academic-led research". In our view it seems important that from the outset all project participants are very clear as to what the "contract of usefulness" is so that they can decide before beginning if the project can meet their expectations or not.

The question of the social impact of methodologies such as MINGA is, however, not a new issue. In past decades there has been considerable debate regarding the impact of methodologies that were understood as "participatory" (Riaño 1995, Pain et al 2011) given that in some very ambitious visions these approaches should have a political impact that would lead to the transformation of capitalist structures of exploitation. What should we make of this? It is important to understand that the purpose and scope of methodologies like MINGA is to initiate a process of reflective transformation that leads to both individual and group enrichment. Wanting to go further would be both pretentious and would put carrying out this type of methodology into question, which would truly be a shame. For McDowell (1992:413) it seems clear that optimistic notions of bridging the difference between research worker and research subjects are not possible. Such a recognition does not, however, mean going back to what text books' call 'scientific' knowledge, and their calls for 'objectivity' and non-involvement in the lives of the people we study, which must be abandoned, but rather means we should strive to construct a "committed, passionate, positioned, partial but critical knowledge". Pain et al (2011:183) propose an "understanding of impact based on the co-production of knowledge between universities and communities, modelled in research practice in participatory geographies". Thus, in conclusion we propose to understand methodologies such as MINGA as "spaces of personal transformation". The role of personal transformation has received relatively little attention by researchers (Cahill 2007). We argue that it is precisely there that the potential of collaborative methodologies such as MINGA lies. Gibson-Graham (2002:52,53) argues that the task of critical researchers lies in contributing to the "creation of new receptivities and to untying the knots of fear that stand in the way of self-transformation". In her view, personal transformation is the entry point for a transformative politics that starts with an enhanced understanding of socio-spatial relations, and works on cultivating new ways of being and new languages, discourses and representations.

The question of the power of representation. One could argue that despite efforts for equality in research partnerships the researchers are in a position of advantage regarding the power to decide and represent. However, as our experience shows, the researchers are not always in a position of absolute power. This became clear from the moment we contacted several women to see if they would be interested in participating in the project. Some women negotiated the conditions of participation and others refused to participate. The position of

the researchers, which at a first glance seemed more powerful, was constantly contested. This was shown during the MINGA workshops as the participants made new proposals regarding the distribution of roles, the structure of the discussion, the distribution of time, the type of categories of analysis to be used, and the orientation of specific proposals of action. The power of definition was thus systematically shared among the research partners. At the same time, despite collaborative workshops such as MINGA, the discourses of the participants need to often be "translated" from an collaborative context into a purely academic one so that they are compatible with the scientific requirements of Universities and research funding agencies (Pain 2004; Pain & Francis 2003, Baghdadi 2012). This points out to the tensions still existing between collaborative approaches and the quality criteria used by most academic and scientific publishing institutions to assess research results.

The principle of co-determination: how should we divide the tasks? One of the most difficult questions faced by methodologies based on the principle of co-determination is to what extent should all participants participate equally in decision-making during each phase of the research? Our experience shows that while co-determination is the guiding principle, this does not mean that in practice each of the participants should carry out all of the tasks. From an organizational point of view it is necessary to find a mechanism that allows for the representation of the voices of all participants throughout the research process without the need for them all to work together all of the time. For economic reasons it is also clear that there is a limit on the amount of time that each participant can invest, and therefore it is necessary to designate who will coordinate the research process of organizing and moderating workshops, processing and synthesizing information, and offering some initial interpretations. Thus, as explained above, though all workshop participants were able to co-decide at three key moments of the research process (research goals, data collection, and analysis and interpretation) it is also is true that it was necessary to designate some people who would have primary responsibility for the project, as was the case with Yvonne Riaño and Nadia Baghdadi (project initiators) and others like Cristina Gutzwiler (representative of the women's group) and Alicia Gamboa (representative of the organization *cfd*) who also co-organized the workshops. This division of labour undoubtedly creates asymmetries given that some people, like the initiators of the project, have greater control over the process of analysis and representation. This situation is however characteristic of the vast majority of democratic political processes, in which inevitably some people must take primary responsibility for leading the participatory process. What seems important to understand is that while total co-determination is a utopia, it is also the guiding principle of the research process and thus one must strive to achieve representation of all of participating voices in each of the three key phases of the research process (setting goals, data collection, analysis and interpretation).

Ethical dilemmas in collaborative research. Ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity have been for many decades a central concern of qualitative research. (Bower & de Gasparis, 1978 ; Israel & Hay, 2006). The ethical issues specifically arising from collaborative methods have, however, not always been sufficiently discussed (Welsh et al 2008). Are there any ethical issues that are specific to collaborative methods ? Addressing this issue in a comprehensive manner is clearly beyond the scope of this paper but some important points shall be raised. First of all, an important issue that arises in collaborative methodologies is to what extent workshop participants should be compensated financially. At this point it must be clear that the goal of a methodology such as MINGA is non-monetary reciprocal exchange. The benefit thus refers to the expansion of knowledge and social capital. Yet there are people who spend several work days on the project, as was the case of the co-organizers of the workshops. This question points to the challenge of how to finance research based on collaborative methodologies. The reality is that research funds are generally scarce and not always easy to obtain. For this project we were able to obtain compensation for the part-time work of the initiators of the MINGA workshops. Likewise we obtained financing for both the transportation costs of participants to the workshops and their

food and beverage costs during the time of the workshops. Thus it was necessary to seek alternative compensation for the co-organizers of the workshops. In the case of the representative of migrant women, it was possible to organize an internship at the Institute of Geography at the University of Bern through which she received financial compensation for her work. In the case of the representative of the organization cfd, we reached an agreement with the organization to include her time spent co-organizing the workshops in her regular work schedule. Secondly, another important question is to what extent collaborative methods such as MINGA are to conducted with any kind of social group independently of their interests? We believe that the issue of values is central to answering this question. Although most collaborative methods recognise the need for both parties in a research partnership to be open to each other's values, in practice, when the ethical/moral and social values of both potential parties are in opposition this makes it impossible to build a research partnership. Methods such as MINGA are thus not value neutral but need to build on a common basis. Finally, the question of how proximity, i.e. a close working relationship, may affect all parties involved in the long term is a particularly relevant issue for collaborative methodologies. Some important questions need to be given careful consideration: may any harms arise from the collaborative activity itself, or from the research outcomes, for the research participants themselves or for third parties ? Will research participants be affected by any possible harms or disadvantages once the academics leave?

The challenges of communication: between closeness and distance. Communication between participants that can have diverse origins, habitus, language, and level of education is undoubtedly one of the most important challenges of collaborative methodologies. What are the implications for the implementation of methodologies like MINGA of the linguistic, socio-cultural and educational "closeness" and "distance" that may exist between participants? In some cases, such as that presented here, the working groups share a common language - for even though their native languages were Arabic, Spanish, Turkish, and Serbo-Croatian, all participants have a university education which allowed for closer communication. This undoubtedly facilitates MINGA style workshops. Yet this type of methodology can also be used with groups with a greater variety of educational levels. It is important to first find a common language of communication. This is where the imagination and sensitivity of researchers plays an important role. While in the example presented here the working tools were comparative analytical tables which analysed barriers and resources, with a more heterogeneous group in terms of educational levels it would probably be more appropriate to work with graphics and tools like mind maps, cartographic maps, drawings, and image quilts (Riaño Pilar, 2006: 158) which allow not only for visualizing the opinions and memories of the participants but can also provide a comparative analysis.

MINGA as performative moment? It could be critically argued that MINGA workshops, where each individual presents her/his biography and a discussion follows, are "performative" moments, where the participants can feel the pressure to present their experiences in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others and/or not address topics which they might consider as too delicate to treat in a group situation. However, as has been widely recognised (e.g. Guest et al 2005), the bias of social desirability can occur across a wide range of qualitative methodologies and survey research. There is also wide consensus that methodological strategies need to be put in place to cope with social desirability. Our strategy was to carry out individual conversations with the women who participated in the workshops in order to counteract social desirability and also address sensitive issues.

The question of reflexivity. Participatory research has being criticized for not being rigorous and for often producing "quick and dirty" research (Chambers 1997). The methodology presented here has been a conscious effort to produce a rigorous and clear methodology with clear steps that also allows for flexibility and adaptability. As other authors have argued (e.g. Paine & Francis 2003: 53), allowing for reflexivity, flexibility and adaptability is important in order for the project to have the greatest possible impacts.

CONCLUSION

This article has questioned the inequalities of power that exist between the researcher and her/his research subjects in representing the studied phenomena, inequalities which are characteristic of the current academic model of knowledge production. We have proposed that this is, on the one hand, a problem of social justice - because unequal research relationships produce unilateral representations, which may result in causing or reinforcing the social exclusion of the studied subjects. On the other hand, it is a problem that impacts on the quality of the research that we produce. By creating an asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and her/his research subjects, academics do not take advantage of the potentials of creating research partnerships between "academic experts" and "everyday life experts". We argue that working together towards producing combined knowledge can actually deepen our understanding of the studied phenomena. The question is thus how can we produce academic knowledge without reinforcing social exclusion and power inequalities? It seems that so far many critical scholars have given more attention to identifying the problems of asymmetrical methodologies and theorizing rather than engaging with solutions regarding the development and implementation of collaborative methodologies. The aim of this paper has thus been to present, and critically reflect, on a new methodology, by the name of MINGA, which we have developed in order to address the problems earlier stated. MINGA proposes a new approach to producing academic knowledge, consisting of establishing research partnerships with the studied subjects, which are oriented by the principles of co-determination and reciprocity. This new methodology was designed in the context of a research project on the experiences of migrant women when trying to gain access to the Swiss labour market.

What is to be learned from the MINGA methodology? First, the question needs to be raised if *achieving equality* between research partners is a realistic aim. This raises in turn the question of what kind of equality we aim to achieve. We have argued that aiming to diminish structural inequality (e.g. income, position in society), is not only unrealistic but often leads to disillusion regarding collaborative knowledge production. MINGA has aimed to produce spaces of communicative exchange where co-determination and mutual learning is possible for the research partners involved. Equality thus refers to specific spaces and specific moments where the research partners are able to discuss, reflect and negotiate with different perspectives and also receive benefits on an equal basis. "Receiving benefits" has been understood as a non-monetary relationship aimed at personal transformation: the strengthening of cultural capital (knowledge) and the reinforcement of social capital (social networks). MINGA can thus be defined as a "space of personal transformation". We believe that it is precisely here that lies the potential of such collaborative methodologies. Cahill (2007) also sees self-analysis leading to a reworking of self-representation as one the most critical contributions of such methodologies. As Gibson-Graham (2002:53) pointedly argues, self-transformation is the entry point for a transformative politics that starts with an enhanced understanding of socio-spatial relations, and works on cultivating new ways of being, new languages, discourses and representations. Cahill et al (2010:412) see such commitments to social change as a feminist praxis of "critical hope".

Second, while it is clear that we strive for a production of knowledge based on the principles of co-determination and reciprocity, the question remains how can we concretely achieve and implement these in the research process? For us, this requires first an exhaustive and critical reflection on the *barriers* that are to be overcome to create more egalitarian research relationships. Because few efforts have been made to identify them and think about how they could be dismantled, these barriers still remain invisible to some academics. This article has presented a typology of barriers that can be useful for advancing our understanding of the

problem. The typology addresses the barriers to equity that emerge from our imaginaries of self and other, existing social hierarchies, limits to communicative exchange, differences in the power of definition, constraints to mutual learning, and the spatial divisions created by "spaces of field work" and "academic spaces". The latter is of particular interest for geographers. This article has proposed a rigorous and systematic methodology designed to dismantle those barriers and create bridges of trust and mutual learning between researchers and their research partners. More critical thought and methodological experimentation is required in this field.

Third, we have stated above that the potential of methodologies such as MINGA is that they can become sites of personal transformation. This raises again the question of what *research partners* are to be addressed by such methodologies. There has been a tendency in the literature to think that participatory methodologies are for the socially excluded, particularly those living in the South. We believe that such an aim automatically creates barriers of social hierarchy between the researchers and their research subjects because they are working with those who are in a socially inferior position. We argue that methodologies such as MINGA are for research partners of varying educational backgrounds, having migration experience or not, who are willing to achieve some form of personal or collective transformation through an improved analytical understanding of an issue of interest, which is the basis for more conscious and deliberate social action (Freire 1970, Cahill 2007).

Finally, as stated in the introduction, research on migrant women in Europe has often showed an "Orientalist" tendency as it has produced unilateral representations that highlight their shortcomings: they are presented as individuals lacking educational and material resources who inevitably become victims of various forms of exploitation in Europe. Such representations have legitimized the need to be protected by European intellectuals and social services. Surprisingly there has been little reflection by academics on how to produce academic *knowledge on migration without reinforcing social exclusion and power inequalities* between researchers and migrant populations. We believe that methodologies such as MINGA, which combine post-colonial critique with the implementation of research partnerships, have great potential as an answer to that question. The challenge in the future is to pull those methodological approaches out of their marginal standing in migration research and to critically reflect on how they could be implemented in different places, situations and with different populations having varying types of migration experience.

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