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MULTI-SITED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSNATIONAL CONCEPTS

Maaret Jokela-Pansini

This paper explores how research participants at multiple sites improve understanding of transnational concepts. It draws on two research projects on women's human rights activism in Honduras and South Africa. Empirical evidence revealed how activists perceived women human rights defenders as an identity and an advocacy tool on different scales. In Honduras, activists in feminist and women's groups from urban and rural areas have identified themselves as women human rights defenders since protests against the coup d'état in 2009. As women human rights defenders, activists integrated women's rights issues into a broader human rights agenda. In South Africa, activists *translated* the concept through transnational networks into the local context. They mostly perceived *women human rights defenders* as a term to use to advocate their position in international contexts, both in order to influence decision-making at international organisations such as the UN, and as a way to build alliances with activists globally.

Scholars have long sought to understand knowledge situated between various geographic and cultural contexts and to ‹disentangle processes of interpretation, translation, stuttering and the partly understood› (Haraway 1991). Some have criticised how geographic studies still reproduce colonial ways of knowing despite reflective approaches in fieldwork

(Sundberg 2014, Faria and Mollett 2016). Others have called for multicultural approaches in research (Hancock 2016, Manea 2016, Mohanty 2003b, Narayan und Harding 2000). A common aim of these contributions has been to understand research from different perspectives.

One such approach is multi-sited research, which is a methodology in ethnography (Marcus 1995, 2009) that generally studies social phenomena that one single site cannot sufficiently explain (Falzon 2016). Some studies have explored how groups or individuals, such as activists or migrants, move between spaces (e.g. Braimbille 2014, Finger 2016), while others have examined particular topics, such as climate change, in various settings including policy-making or research institutes (Krauss 2016). In multi-sited research, researchers move between sites following people, connections and relationships across space (Falzon 2016). Like feminist approaches, multi-sited research seeks to decentralise knowledge.

Multi-sited research, like human geographic approaches, regards space as socially constructed. Hence, this study understands research as a relational practice that researchers and participants mutually construct (Demeritt und Dyer 2002, Massey 1999, Okazawa-Rey 2009). Such understanding of space replaces fixed categories such as location with the language of flows and fluidity (Marston, Jones und Woodward 2005). Multi-sited approaches mostly investigate how actors move between spaces but rarely study how transnational concepts such as human rights are understood in different places. Understanding women's human rights concepts is important because for a decade, women activists from urban and rural areas worldwide have been framing their activism as women human rights defenders. Scholars, including Fraser (2013), argue that women have found new ways to respond to multilevel socioeconomic and political crises in the 21st century. I argue that women human rights defenders is one of those ways. Feminist and women's organisations have acknowledged that transnational alliances are crucial for work-

ing against neoliberal markets and for gender and social justice (Mohanty 2013, Thayer 2010). Other scholars have emphasised the strategic value of such frameworks and stated these allow activists ‹to contain and control› the system and enhance community wellbeing (Katz 2012, p. 631).

Research at multiple sites is crucial particularly for understanding how discourse moves between spaces. Human rights concepts are not set but rather constitute different meanings when they travel between local, regional and transnational spaces. Finally, as Okazawa-Rey (2009) reminds us, language is key for understanding concepts, including human rights. Along with its cultural context, language is always something to be negotiated, not to be taken for granted, and not to be assumed.

METHODOLOGY

Merry (2006) has stated that various intermediaries help translate human rights, including local activists, human rights lawyers, feminist NGO leaders, academics, or others who have one foot in the transnational community and one at home. In the past few years, my research has focused on such actors, particularly the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras (Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras). As a *crossed gaze* in South Africa, I focused in this study on two networks and one organisation, which are all members of international women human rights defenders networks. Just Associates International (JASS), the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS).

I worked in a feminist organisation in 2008-2009 in Tegucigalpa. For four months in 2013, I conducted semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Esperanza with 30 women activists. In 2014-2016, informal conversations

with numerous women human rights defenders at UN meetings in Geneva, Switzerland, deepened my understanding of instruments, discourses and networks around women's human rights activism.

In South Africa, I consciously sought a *speaking-with approach* (Nagar 2014), which also enabled the participants to ask questions about my research in Honduras. This study does not claim that all women activists in Honduras or in South Africa embrace this activist identity but rather acknowledges that some might have different views. For example, four of the other organisations I interviewed were not familiar with the term or framed their activism differently. *Activists* or *participants* in my study refer to the women of these specific networks and organisations in Honduras and South Africa, which are composed of women from various ages, race, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

I seek to present research participants' views and at the same time, acknowledge that my understanding has also been influenced by my location and identity (Mama 2011, Naples 2003). Also, some participants in South Africa were already familiar with women human rights defenders but others learned about the term through our conversations. So, in my role as intermediary, I *translated* to some activists in South Africa what I had learned from Honduran women human rights defenders or from international organisations. As Katz notes, ‹[e]ven in a universe decentred and in flux, we are situated and bear responsibility for interrogating our positionings› (Katz 1992, p. 504).

Part of such interrogation is to acknowledge how multi-sited research comprises researchers who are intermediaries of human-rights discourse (Merry 2006). Like the participants, South African research collaborators enabled me to reflect on the concepts I used and encouraged me to view the concept from different perspectives. Thus, multi-sited research goes beyond mere self-reflection on positionality and encourages

us to include participants' and researchers' gaze outside the case study into the analytical process (GWG SD 2016).

LAYING THE GROUND FOR MULTI-SITED COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT *SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY – CONTESTS OF VALUES AND INTERESTS*

The project Safeguarding Democracy – Contests of Values and Interests was a collaboration between scholars of the Universities of Bern and Basel in Switzerland and the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa from 2010 to 2018. Firstly, the project's aim was to gain a *crossed gaze* on our individual research projects. In our Gender Working Group (GWG), the research focused on women's human rights activism. While researchers based at Swiss universities conducted fieldwork in South Africa, South African project members studied women's human rights discourse in Switzerland. Sheila Meintjes, co-leader of the project, described how the approach seeks to understand our particular views when we look from different places (GWG SD 2015). Secondly, the aim was to explore how to break patterns of northern dominance in research projects. As our Gender Working Group stated, a crossed gaze helped researchers to reflect on different positionalities regarding women's human rights organising. This led to new ways of thinking, conceptualising and theorising intersectionality and women's human rights (GWG SD 2016). Thus, this paper should be read as part of a larger project, which includes other *crossed gazes* on women's human rights activism in South Africa and in Switzerland.

The methodology is in line with feminist postcolonial theories including standpoint and intersectional theories highlighting the diversity of women's experience (Crenshaw 1991, Mohanty 2003a). The approach draws on numerous scholars' criticism of essentialist gender and cultural categories assuming that *women* have a coherent group identity within different cultures (Narayan and Harding 2000, Mohanty 2003). These studies suggest that gender essentialism constructs sharp

binaries about the qualities, abilities, and locations of *men* and *women* while cultural essentialism constructs sharp binaries between *Western culture* and *non-Western cultures* or *other* cultures.

The collaborative project went in both directions and provided a *southern* perspective on *northern* research contexts. It was therefore distinct from much other North-South cooperation (Meintjes und Scheidegger 2013). Our collaborative work was the basis for this article's multi-sited research methodology that emphasises the spatial fluidity of sites and multiple perspectives.

WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN HONDURAS AND SOUTH AFRICA

In Honduras, militarisation and political instability have often been the ground for repression against women human rights defenders (IM-Defensoras 2013, Jokela-Pansini 2016). In addition, rural communities, most of them indigenous or Afro-descendant Garífuna, have lost their lands because the state is privatising communal and state-owned property and selling it to international investors (Brondo 2011, Mollett 2017). A woman human rights lawyer explained:

> *Before, it [human rights defender] was a job. When someone knew of human rights violations, he/she searched for people who worked in organisations. Now the same people are capable of making announcements, calling the radio and documenting human rights violations. [After the coup] many people documented what happened in their communities and brought the documentations to us. Now there are lawyers networks, of environmental lawyers, of women defenders, in various sectors. So this is what happened, it was a mere necessity.*

This statement shows that the activists used an international concept but embraced it as a local identity, as *defensoras*. It shows that understanding how women themselves define

their activism is important because such definitions can challenge international organisations' assumptions (Nagar 2014).

In addition, their identity construction reflected transnational discourses on women human rights defenders, which promote self-care and feminist popular education as part of protecting activists. These discourses emphasise the need for defending other women human rights defenders but also of taking care of one's own body and well-being (IM-Defensoras 2013).

The women interviewed saw the concept as a strategy and advocacy tool on multiple scales besides being an identity. Locally, the interviewees felt the network protected them and raised their visibility in local communities. Internationally, as women human rights defenders, activists participated in human rights delegations at the UN or the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In joint submissions, they included gender-specific concerns into a broader human-rights agenda. This shows how human rights concepts hold discursive power for feminists and other women activists in specific contexts.

In South Africa, a growing number of organisations has adopted the concept *women human rights defenders*, including the Association for Progressive Communications, the Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP), Just Associates International (JASS) and Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS). During my fieldwork in 2015, some participants explained that women human rights defenders was still a rare concept in South Africa. Maggie from JASS explained how the concept in Southern Africa was different from other world regions:

[Regionally], it doesn't have the same currency as it has in Mesoamerica (...) that it is empowering for women to define themselves as defenders.

Some argued that organisations saw the human rights language coming from donors.

Maggie stated that in South Africa their entry point at JASS was self-care and women's bodies. This was similar to transnational discourses on women human rights defenders and the statements of activists in Honduras. Jenny noted that many called themselves rather feminists or women's rights activists, although the activism or work they did was the same as women human rights defenders in other world regions. These conversations broke the fixed understanding I initially had of women human rights defenders through my fieldwork in Honduras, so, the concept was fluid. Activists translated parts of the discourse into the local context, particularly those on bodily integrity.

Similar to Honduran activists, South African activists considered the framework important in international advocacy work. Many related their activism to struggles against neoliberal politics, which is in line with Fraser's (2013a) assertion that activists frame their activism according to crises on multiple scales. South Africa has a wide gap between rich and poor and many activists saw this affecting their activism, access to justice, and social inequality. Thus, these women human rights defenders connected their advocacy work with concerns of activists from other countries. As Jenny noted, ‹Women human rights defenders' is a very strong label, even the word itself›.

In addition to advocating for human rights at international organisations such as the UN, the term enabled activists to build transnational alliances – even though most didn't identify themselves as defenders. In one activist's view, the term itself was the issue. In Honduras, they may understand *defensoras* differently than South African participants understood *defenders* or the translation into ten other official languages by their respective activists. So, language plays a crucial role in activism.

CONCLUSIONS

Human geographers underline how identities, interests and views are constructed through lived experiences on multiple scales. In Honduras, activists experienced human rights violations during the protests. Since then, activists have also adopted the identity at international organisations such as the UN. In South Africa, activists translated the concept through transnational networks. They perceived it primarily as a tool to advocate internationally as well as to build transnational alliances with other activists.

How has this multi-sited research methodology shaped the research process and outcomes? This methodology goes beyond mere self-reflection on positionality because it encourages us to include participants' and researchers' gaze beyond a single case study. In addition to explaining how the network of women human rights defenders emerged, it allowed all involved in the research to reflect on how and in which contexts and at what scales activists perceived and translated the term in Honduras and South Africa.

These findings indicate the various ways that activists globally identify themselves as women human rights defenders and that women human rights defenders is not a homogeneous concept. It can refer to an indigenous woman who defends the environment, an urban feminist organising for reproductive rights, a woman advising victims of domestic abuse, or an internet-rights activist. Women's human rights framing can vary but still pursue the same goals – whether activists refer to women's activism, feminist activism or defending women's human rights. Thus, multi-sited research improves our understanding of transnational concepts that activists, decision-makers, and scholars in the international community often take for granted.

Finally, this study has shown that human rights concepts do have discursive power for feminists and other women activists in specific contexts. Transnational concepts are not

therefore *given*. Rather, activists' lived experiences on multiple scales shape the way they understand and *translate* such concepts. This geographic research, emphasising the importance of multiple research perspectives, can and should be extended to how activists perceive, conceptualise, and benefit from such frameworks.

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