



Listening Across Borders: Participatory and Action-Oriented Research for Inclusive Social Change in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This working paper investigates the potential impact of research engagement on team members involved in research design, coordination, and implementation. It explores how participatory and action-oriented research may affect researchers, particularly those from the studied communities, with the intent to understand whether such impacts can dually serve as interventions in specific social contexts. The paper focuses on a case study implementing a locally developed approach known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand to understand the regional context of minorities and the potential for inclusive social change. By examining the broader implications of such research processes on participating research team members, the paper raises the potential of intentionally designed inquiry to foster social change through critical reflection at the individual and group levels. Findings suggest that participatory methods like FLD may serve as powerful interventional tools for individual transformation and context-specific social change.

Introduction

Researchers are often motivated by personal factors that drive their interest in specific topics. This is sometimes called 'me-search', where researchers pursue questions relevant to their own experiences. Such positionality can shape how their work is perceived by the public, both positively and negatively (Altenmüller et al., 2021). In 2019, community members in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand initiated a participatory and action-oriented research project to gather information on minority groups across the region. With simultaneous ambitions to leverage the research as an intervention, this regional initiative utilised a method known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) to address mainstream negative sentiment towards ethnic minority Vietnamese residents in Cambodia by comparing relatable minority groups in neighbouring countries. The research team comprised members with diverse positionalities concerning the minority groups under study, including those with thematic interests and lived experience.

This paper examines how participatory and action-oriented research may foster inclusive social change, assuming that involving directly impacted individuals promotes transformation through meaningful exposure and interaction. The case study's focus on inclusiveness in social change goals reflects "us" and "them" dichotomies in understanding which group's needs may be unmet, and how their social value may be improved (Sweetman et al., 2013: 300-301). Although motivations of multistakeholder involvement in such collaborative research initiatives are undoubtedly diverse and individual, subsequent participation has the potential to impact the research team on varying levels. On social issues, such as minority exclusion as explored in the case study presented, this suggests that transformational impacts of inquiry could potentially foster social change through more inclusive methods that involve those who such studies are about. This paper examines change through a specific research process involving both mainstream and minority groups in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, emphasising that social change occurs incrementally, one person at a time.

Participation, Action, and Transformation in Research

Participatory and action-oriented research is a broader term to encompass approaches often related to community-based and participatory action research (PAR). PAR emphasises researcher-participant collaboration to address community issues, rooted in the belief that directly impacted individuals should shape the research process. Reason and Bradbury (2001) argue that action research is as important for its process as its outcomes, as it generates practical knowledge and fosters collaborative learning. They emphasise that such relational practice fosters new

abilities to generate knowledge through a process that is deeply intertwined with human aspirations and social change.

Transformative research, a concept closely related to PAR, seeks to challenge existing paradigms and promote social, economic, and environmental justice. In the natural sciences, transformative research often involves paradigm shifts that lead to new ways of understanding and interacting with the world (Huang et al., 2013; Trevors et al., 2012). In the social sciences, transformative research is linked to power dynamics and social change, questioning the status quo and advocating for justice and equity (Mertens, 2021). From an inclusion perspective, particularly relevant to the study outlined in this paper, the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley conceptualises transformative research in practice as a metaphor to breathing, something that is innate and natural:

At its core, transformative research is a process of *intentionally and consciously* taking in something from the world around us, and putting out something from inside us... This means listening to our community and families, and observing our social and physical environment with intention, a process for reflecting on what we hear and observe, and mindfulness about how this changes our actions (Aviles et al., 2023: 29).

Such an understanding aligns with the goals of PAR, which aim to empower participants and foster critical reflection and action. At the same time, the focus on intention accompanies the nature of knowledge production to go further in its action to change, starting from oneself even within the process. This centres the researcher themselves within the broader action of research that may also have interventional elements.

The impact of research processes on participants and researchers has been a topic of some interest in certain areas of literature, including that specific to qualitative research design. MacNeill et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study examining the effects of research participation on behaviour change trials. They found that well-designed qualitative studies could foster behavioural change among participants, highlighting the potential for research processes to have a transformative impact. Similarly, but from a negative viewpoint, Wray et al. (2007) explored the concept of "researcher saturation", examining the emotional and mental health impacts of intensive qualitative research on researchers. They found that repeated exposure to traumatic data could lead to burnout and mental health challenges, raising important ethical considerations for researchers.

In the context of PAR and transformative research, the relational dynamics between researchers and participants are particularly significant, potentially contributing to outcomes involving the collaboration among distinct stakeholders. Bradbury et al.

(2019) emphasise the importance of relational, conceptual, and experimental spaces in fostering transformational dimensions in action research. They argue that these spaces allow for the co-creation of knowledge and the development of new ways of understanding and addressing social issues. This perspective is supported by Reimer (2015), who explores the transformative potential of research that incorporates conflict transformation principles, Indigenous traditions, and storytelling. Both these conceptualisations of research as an interactive and flowing process reflect processual elements of FLD, the method used in this study, as a relational approach that aims to challenge perceptions and build bridges through participatory and action-oriented inquiry (Women Peace Makers, 2017).

Methodology

This study draws from the original research conducted in 2019 using FLD as both a method of inquiry as well as a community intervention in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. The interventional aspect aimed to foster deeper critical thinking on negative attitudes towards the ethnic Vietnamese minority in Cambodia among the public by exploring relatable minorities outside the country. As the original project lead imparted in an interview, “What if we get mainstream Khmer Cambodians to look at Khmer minorities in other countries, such as in neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam, and we ask the question ‘What about Vietnamese here?’ This will make people think” (Okamura, 2024). This paper’s author, a co-developer of the FLD method, collaborated with the project lead and coordinators from each country to design a research framework that was adaptable for each site while ensuring consistency for comprehensive analysis across all groups in the study. The coordinators of each of the three countries were (unintentionally) selected from the mainstream ethnic majority groups of their country.

FLD is a participatory and action-oriented approach in which community researchers (known as “Listeners” in the method) are selected to carry out inquiry with participants (known as “Sharers”) within their own communities or those with whom they identify (Women Peace Makers, 2017). In Thailand, ethnic Khmer (Khmer Surin) Listeners joined to conduct FLD with community members in Surin province where a large population of the ethnic Khmer of Thailand reside. Both Listeners considered themselves Khmer Surin and worked in traditional silk weaving unique to the local community. Those working with Cambodian migrant workers were also recruited in Trat province. One was a Cambodian overseas worker supporting migrant workers, while the other was an ethnic Khmer Thai citizen who worked with Cambodian migrants and spoke the northern Khmer dialect. In Vietnam, ethnic Khmer Listeners who spoke Khmer and considered themselves part of the Khmer Krom (southern

Khmer minority of Vietnam) community in Tra Vinh and Tay Ninh provinces joined the initiative. In Cambodia, ethnic Vietnamese Listeners were selected.

While the study took place with the floating communities of mainly stateless residents on the Tonle Sap River, the Listeners did not come directly from any of these communities. This was due to ethical considerations and the inability to recruit stateless Listeners which, in this context, has continually proven to be very challenging, given their precarious legal identity and the risks they face in participating due to socio-political marginalisation (Hyma, 2024). The Listeners in Cambodia, however, were ethnic Vietnamese, spoke the language, and considered themselves a minority within the broader Cambodian context. They offered a positionality within the research that was composed of both insider and outsider elements of identity into the community of study.

The country coordinators and the Listeners were brought together in Phú Quốc, Vietnam for an FLD Coaching and Training Lab and subsequently commenced fieldwork in their respective sites. Each of the four research teams conducted 40 “conversations” (similar to interviews) as per the FLD method’s specific criteria. Each pair located and reached out to “Sharers” (respondents) in their communities to have conversations about living as a minority. They relied on guide questions formulated during the lab, which were memorised and used to help Listeners steer the conversation towards the topic, while allowing the Sharer to lead the conversation in their desired direction, focusing on the topic at hand. No written or audio recordings were made during conversations; instead, Listeners individually completed a written template after each conversation to capture what they heard and understood.

After completing four conversations and having individually recorded them separately by memory, the pair of Listeners then came together to discuss any common themes across all conversations, unique stories, and any disagreements they may have had in recalling details of the conversations, recorded in a team journal. This first step in analysis begins to distil the data by the Listeners themselves and helps make sense of what they have heard during fieldwork. It also fosters the start of thematic categorisation as they seek common themes heard among different Sharers. All Listeners and the research design team reconvened six months later in Buriram, Thailand to process data, initiate group analysis through theme-development, and explore any transformative dimensions of the research process. Later thematic analysis was carried out with the recorded written data by a small team to verify themes through data coding of the submitted conversation logs and team journals.

The research team produced multiple outputs related to the process and findings. Along with insights into the methodological evolution of FLD, findings and process were published in a book co-authored by the regional team and guest authors (Hyma

et al., 2022). Documentaries were produced by Listeners on the stories of selected Sharers to humanise the data following fieldwork (An Ancestor's Dance, 2019; Ice Cream on a River, 2019; One Border, Two Lives, 2019; Weaving a Culture, 2019). Multiple sharing and dissemination events took place within the communities where fieldwork was conducted to bring the research back to those who had participated as well as disseminate findings to mainstream audiences as part of the inclusive social change agenda (Minorities Across Our Region, 2019; Life Afloat, 2020; Hyma & Kry, 2023). All these research outputs involved the participation of multiple research team members and were collaborative.

Five years following the FLD implementation, the author conducted documentary research to review both published findings and unpublished data related to the project, multiple outputs including creative works for research mobilisation and articles written about the inquiry, as well as autoethnographic data compiled during the process. Beyond the main content findings on the minority groups included in the project, and released over the years following its completion, a consolidation of indications regarding effects and impacts on the research team was carried out. This was gathered from the outputs, as referred to above, that included discussion on this topic, as well as testimonial information and observations captured in notes. Given that the focus of the project during its implementation was distinct from the objectives of this post-project study, the information gathered provides limited understanding of how those involved were impacted by the content and the process of the project. However, the insights furnish value in understanding complex dimensions of impact and transformations taking place alongside research implementation. These limited findings call for subsequent investigation to further understand individual and group-level changes as well as the broader potential for participatory and action-oriented research processes tailored around impacting those who are involved in social change inquiry.

Research Impacts upon the Research Team

Although the original study on regional minority groups did not specifically focus on impacts or transformational elements among the Listeners or the research team, evidence of aspects of change has emerged in data and outputs sharing the thematic knowledge produced from the project. Such indications appear in storytelling among the researchers, reflective sessions during the process, and participant observation. For this documentary research, referred outputs included the published findings from the book co-authored by the research team (Hyma et al., 2022), unpublished notes from the data processing and analysis workshop and fieldwork (Sen, 2019; Hyma, 2019), and published articles about the project and its findings (Hyma & Kry, 2023; Okamura, 2024). Impacts on the Listeners have been categorised into two themes

that explore self-reflection on identity and community and mainstream transcendence to minority.

Self-reflection on identity and community

The project's focus on minorities highlighted team members' own minority and mainstream identities and positionalities within the research. Many Listeners coming from minority communities found the FLD process deepened their sense of community and self-awareness. One Listener reflected on the process, saying, "I had a chance to listen to others and reflect on my own life... I found myself in FLD" (Hyma et al., 2022: 37). Another minority Listener said, "I have been able to better understand my own Khmer heritage and identity, almost as if something had awoken in me from listening to others" (Hyma et al, 2022: 82). Similarly, a Listener who had been living abroad to support migrant workers in their neighbouring country identified deeply with those they served, holding a complex conceptualisation between the concepts of "house" versus "home" and the precarious situation of living as a foreigner in another country (Hyma et al, 2022: 126-127).

The impact of the research method on identity awareness and formation was particularly pronounced following the data processing activities among the Listeners. Some revealed in a reflective session that FLD enabled them to use their minority languages differently from their usual conversational style with their families. Additionally, conducting conversations within their communities provided new insights into issues they now wished to support more collectively (Sen, 2019: 24). This was particularly evident in the case of one Listener who had previously hesitated to disclose their ethnic minority status publicly and to other team members during the initial phase of the project. They noted, "During the field[work], I could speak VN [Vietnamese], more open minded to listen to other stories, more understanding, more talkative and connection, better at time management, and more confident showing my identity. I'm a Vietnamese and Cambodia is my home (Sen, 2019: 86).

Connection to community through individual identity appeared to also foster a desire among Listeners to support and contribute to their minority communities. In reflection, a Listener shared their own internal question, "I listened to others [in my own community] and I began to think how can I contribute more and help them?" (Hyma et al., 2022: 38). For another Listener, the FLD process made them realise they could become more involved in their community and even strengthen it as a minority group. A public screening of the film they had produced appeared to inspire them to want to bring more people to join in public events that promoted their ethnic identity (Sen, 2019: 91). One Listener who previously felt they did not engage much in their own ethnic minority community felt that after putting their "heart in conversations," they

reflected more upon who they were and became committed to “listen more deeply” to their community (Sen, 2019: 24).

Mainstream transcendence to minority

Although an unintentional aspect of the research design, the three country coordinators selected from each country were not minorities themselves. They focused on engaging with minority communities in their own contexts. This involved extensive scoping work and engagement with minority communities to recruit potential Listeners and foster relationships for fieldwork. As an unexpected outcome of the project, it was observed that the mainstream coordinators who had been designing the research process from the earlier phase and subsequently supporting travel and logistics for recruited Listeners experienced an evolving dynamic: they began to see themselves as a minority in the project with a disconnect to the identities among the Listeners coming from minority groups.

‘At one gathering, the coordinators expressed that at times they felt like the minorities when they were in the group. It was at this time that we realised that the simulation of placing minority groups together by removing the relevance of borders and having mainstream participants join on the periphery had deepened a true and genuine sense of understanding ‘us’ to know ‘them’ in practice’ (Hyma et al., 2022: 38).

This phenomenon became clearer as the group engaged more deeply and met more often. The impact of that appeared to accompany some mainstream coordinators to learn more about and possibly emphasise with minorities in their own countries. One coordinator felt that because they could not speak the same language as most participants (Khmer) and were unable to connect with others’ minority experiences, they “became a minority in the project” (Hyma & Kry, 2023: 20). They further stated they “heard the unheard” and the “unsaid words” from the minorities through the FLD process (Sen, 2019: 24, 91). As one of the research team members myself, I also made note of this dynamic in my own journal as we progressed in the project’s implementation. I observed a relational aspect of most of the group using Khmer language to communicate, and a focus on comparing the lives of the minority groups across the borders, particularly during more social hours outside workshop sessions. The Cambodian coordinator (mainstream Khmer) appeared to integrate easily, but the Thai and Vietnamese coordinators were unable to participate in much of this social interaction due to language and cultural barriers (Hyma, 2019).

In reviewing subsequent documentation on the reflection of these coordinators, it appears they were able to experience and hear things from minority groups in their own countries that they had little to no exposure to before the project. These indications demonstrate the potential that well designed methods might have to foster

empathy between majority and minority groups working jointly on a project with shared goals. Although this aspect of impact on the research team members working across marginalisation status has gone largely unexplored in empirical terms, it is an area that should be further investigated given the possibility that such research design could contribute to action and impact through the inquiry process itself.

Conclusion

Most researchers and those involved in research are anecdotally aware that they are impacted by the research they conduct. However, little empirical work has explored how the research process may transform the context in which the study is being carried out through those who are participating. For researchers and practitioners working in social change, the prospect of considering research as a potential intervention is highly compelling. This study has demonstrated certain transformative effects of participatory and action-oriented research methods on research team members, specifically through FLD in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. By involving community members as active participants, FLD has shown significant impacts on both the research team and the communities involved. Participatory methods like FLD can serve as powerful tools for individual transformation and potential inclusive social change, providing valuable insights and fostering empathy among researchers, particularly when they come directly from the communities and context of the study.

The research team's experiences reveal personal growth, including self-reflection on identity and shifts in perspective, highlighting participatory research's capacity to foster critical reflection and empathy. However, the study acknowledges the limitations in data and relying mainly on unexpected outcomes given its distinct original scope. It also recognises the challenges and ethical considerations of the complexity of representative participation, such as involving stateless individuals or the potential for research saturation. Participatory and action-oriented research methods like FLD hold significant promise for fostering individual transformation that may contribute to social change. Prioritising the voices of minority communities can contribute to more inclusive societies through building awareness as early as the start of inquiry. The insights gained from this study provide a convincing case for the continued use and development of participatory and action-oriented research methodologies in social change initiatives. Future research should build on these findings to further understand the long-term impacts of intentionally designed approaches and to refine methodologies that maximise their transformative potential.

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