COMMONS

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO LOW-INCOME YOUTH'S ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Leonardo Custódio

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EL COMPROMISO DE LOS JÓVENES CON BAJOS INGRESOS CON LA COMUNICACIÓN PARA EL CAMBIO SOCIAL: UN ENFOQUE ETNOGRÁFICO

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic approach to how low-income Brazilians of impoverished urban areas have engaged in community journalism and media activism. Exploring empirical materials collected during a seven-year research process (2009-2016), the article has two main objectives. One is to analyze how low-income youth reflect on their own processes of engagement in communication for social change (CFSC). Another objective is to demonstrate how ethnography can provide in-depth analyses of trajectories and initiatives in CFSC. The article primarily focuses on retrospective accounts of young adults who had participated in media-educational projects by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and subsequently became active agents of change in, through and about media. The analysis of these accounts indicates how the participation in NGO projects characterize actions for self-development. It also demonstrates how interactions among participants–not necessarily anticipated by NGOs –are crucial for low-income youth to engage in activist media and journalism in peripheral Rio de Janeiro. The article ends with a reflection about how ethnography is a useful method to add in-depth qualitative layers to the evaluation of CFSC initiatives.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un enfoque etnográfico sobre la forma en que los brasileños con bajos ingresos en las zonas urbanas empobrecidas se han involucrado en el periodismo comunitario y el activismo mediático. Explorando materiales empíricos recogidos durante un proceso de investigación de siete años (2009-2016), el artículo tiene dos objetivos principales. Uno de ellos es analizar cómo los jóvenes con bajos ingresos reflexionan sobre sus propios procesos de participación en la comunicación para el cambio social (CCS). Otro objetivo es demostrar cómo la etnografía puede aportar un análisis profundo sobre las trayectorias e iniciativas en la CCS. El artículo se centra principalmente en relatos retrospectivos de adultos jóvenes que habrían participado en proyectos de educación mediática por parte de organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONG) y que posteriormente se convirtieron en agentes activos promoviendo un cambio, a través y sobre los medios de comunicación. El análisis de estos relatos indica cómo la participación en proyectos de ONG caracteriza acciones de autodesarrollo. También demuestra cómo las interacciones entre los participantes -no necesariamente anticipadas por las ONG- son cruciales para que los jóvenes con bajos ingresos participen en los medios de comunicación y periodismo activistas en la periférica ciudad de Río de Janeiro. El artículo termina con una reflexión sobre cómo la etnografía es un método útil para agregar capas cualitativas profundas a la evaluación de las iniciativas del CFSC.

Keywords

Ethnography; Media Education; Participation; Youth; Communication for Social Change

Palabras clave

Etnografía; Educación Mediática; Participación; Juventud; Comunicación para el Cambio Social

1. Adriana, Pedro and Maria are pseudonyms.

1. Introduction

It was a typically warm autumn in Rio de Janeiro in 2013 when I interviewed Adriana, Pedro and Maria[1] . At the time, I was conducting my research (2009-2016) about the engagement of low-income youth in media initiatives against discrimination, human rights violations and

social injustice. This article[2] builds on the knowledge I acquired during the ethnographic process. Based on it, I reflect upon how and why low-income young people from Rio de Janeiro's impoverished and violence-ridden urban areas widely known as favelas (Perlman, 2010; Zaluar & Alvito, 2006) engage with activist media and journalism.

Adriana, Pedro and Maria have been born and raised in different favelas[3]. They have also had different trajectories in activist media and journalism. Adriana (then 27 years old) had acted as a journalist in a favela-based newspaper since she was 17. More recently, in addition to reporting, she has organized and participated community media courses across the country. Pedro (then 25) had already built a positive reputation as an activist photographer and photography instructor. Today, he acts in a media collective that produces short films with children from favelas. Maria (then in her late 20s) had acted for over a decade as a media educator in peripheral Rio de Janeiro. Lately she has also been active in nationwide youth networks as well as in international social research organizations.

In addition to media activism, another common characteristic between Adriana, Pedro and Maria is that their media and journalistic histories are connected to non-governmental organizations (NGOs)[4]. The favela-based newspaper in which Adriana was a volunteer journalist was a community media project created by an NGO. Pedro worked as a photography instructor in another NGO which provided media-related courses for favela and non-favela residents. The media education initiatives in which Maria taught were also part of the repertoire of a third NGO. Again, that is not necessarily a coincidence.

Following a Latin American tradition (Sartoretto, 2016), the Brazilian civil society has historically combined media education with sociopolitical education to promote civic knowledge among young people of impoverished backgrounds. These pedagogical initiatives are key elements in processes of communication for social change (CFSC)[5] in the country. Since the 1990s, NGOs have become the main promoters of media-educational projects (Gohn, 2011; Baroni, 2013; Dysman, 2013). For example, the NGOs in which Adriana, Pedro and Maria acted when I met them have been active for the past two decades as well-established promoters of what we could call initiatives of media education for social change (Custódio, 2016).

2. Parts of this article have appeared in the conference paper entitled "From NGO Beneficiaries to Media Activists: Assessing Media Education in Favelas of Rio" presented at the Glocal Conference on Communication for Development in September, 2014 (http://voiceandmatter.net/) and also in the author's doctoral dissertation (Custódio, 2016).

3. Adriana and Pedro have respectively lived in *Maré* and *Jacarezinho*, two favelas located at the north zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Maria lived in *Proventório*, a favela at Niterói, a city in the metropolitan area of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

4. There have been discussions about what characterizes NGOs and how they differ from community-based organizations (CBOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), for example (Willetts, 2011). In Rio de Janeiro, the jargon also includes the acronym OSCIP (public interest civil society organization). In this article, however, my use of terms like "NGO" and "project" follows how favela residents refer to those organizations and their pedagogical initiatives.

5. As a field of research and action, communication for social change (CFSC) "is a way of thinking and practice that puts people in control of the means and content of communication processes. Based on dialogue and collective action, CFSC is a process of public and private dialogue through which people determine who they are, what they need and what they want in order to improve their lives. It has at its heart the assumption that affected people understand their realities better than any 'experts' from outside their society, and that they can become the drivers of their own change" (Tufte & Gumucio-Dagron, 2006, p. xix).

Most importantly, Adriana, Pedro and Maria had also participated as students in NGO projects for media education[6]. In the NGOs they respectively learned journalism, photography and media pedagogy. Like them, most young adults from favelas now engaged in activist media and journalism had studied in similar projects. Today, Rio de Janeiro has a vibrant scene of grassroots CFSC initiatives raising voices from/to different favelas. The NGO media education projects have played an unquestionable role promoting media skills and sociopolitical knowledge among favela residents engaged in those initiatives (Gohn, 2011; Custódio, 2016).

In this article, however, the goal is to make a participant-centered rather than an NGO-centered approach to processes of youth engagement in favela-based activist media and journalism. What can we learn about CFSC practices if we focus on young people as agents of their own processes of sociopolitical engagement? How to avoid a potentially simplistic claim that young favela residents act *because* of what NGOs teach them? To answer these questions, I use ethnographic observations and the retrospective accounts of Adriana, Pedro and Maria about their own trajectories in favela-based activist media and journalism. Based on these empirical materials, I demonstrate how their participation in NGO media education projects characterize acts for self-empowerment. In addition, I show how interactions with instructors, teachers and especially other participants gave political meaning to the technical and political knowledge they acquired in the projects.

2. Ethnography as a Method for In-Depth CFSC Analysis

This article results from a seven-year (2009-2016) critical ethnographic study (Thomas, 1993) about the engagement of young favela residents in activist media and journalism in Rio de Janeiro. Methods included online and offline observations of activist practices. I also conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with NGO directors, media education project coordinators and favela residents now active in media activism who had participated in NGO projects. Since critical ethnography also denotes efforts to engage research in the sociopolitical processes one investigates, I have also acted together with activist media and journalism practitioners in lectures, workshops and seminars targeting favela residents, public school teachers in low-income areas, and university students.

To analyze the interviewees' retrospective accounts, I applied symbolic interactionism principles to investigate how people construct meanings for their own social actions (Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001). According to these principles, meanings arise and change as people act, interact and (re)interpret what their own actions mean. In this sense, interviewing and observing the actions of Adriana, Pedro and Maria, among others, allowed me to reflect about how people who had participated of NGO media education projects described how their participation related to their activism. In addition to analyzing the trajectories of favela young adults from NGO participants to media activists, this article also demonstrates how ethnography can provide in-depth qualitative knowledge to the evaluation of CFSC initiatives (Tacchi, 2016).

3. The limitations of NGO-centered approaches to CFSC initiatives

After an interview, a young man called a peer activist on the phone to persuade her to talk to me. Perceiving her reluctance, he explained her how I was a different researcher because "[…] he is interested in us, not in the NGOs." After the clarification, she agreed to an interview. His words suggested how conflicting the relationship between NGOs and favela-based activists can be. For example, some activists I met claimed NGOs take advantage of their institutional position to act as if they were the main representatives of favelas in sociopolitical affairs. This situation has led to difficulties for independent activists. For example, some of the favela-based activists I met claimed it has been difficult for them to receive financial support from state agencies since NGOs are more likely to get them due to their institutional reputations.

The dominance of NGOs that disturb favela-based activists in Rio de Janeiro also seem to appear in development and CFSC literature. Studies about development initiatives are mostly centered on the organizations that create the initiatives. Some have focused on organizational strategies (Eade, 2000; Edwards & Hulme, 1992; 1997) while others have focused on the organization's accountability (Bendell, 2006; Kilby, 2006). In such cases, rather than agents, participants tend to appear as targets of carefully planned and conducted interventions. Similarly, CFSC research does not often put the experience of participants in the fore of research agenda. Recently, key scholars in NGO studies (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006) and in the CFSC field (Hemer & Tufte, 2012; Rodriguez, Ferron & Shamas, 2014; Thomas, 2015) have displayed concern about the impasses in research and how new methodologies, methods and approaches are urgently needed to promote advancements in CFSC research.

Following previous research in NGO studies (Hilhorst, 2003; White, 2000), I would argue, along with existing literature (Tacchi, 2016), that ethnographic approaches to participants' experiences in CFSC are important steps in that direction.

4. NGO-driven Media Education for Self-Empowerment

One problematic buzzword in the development and CFSC vocabulary is "empowerment". In short, it is problematic because "empowerment" usually appears in discourses that suggest someone –like an NGO, a foundation, the World Bank– will strategically to promote initiatives to empower someone else –like Adriana, Pedro, Maria and others thought to need help for living in perceived contexts of poverty, violence and social vulnerability– (Cornwall & Eade, 2010; White, 2004). These kinds of arguments and approaches risk neglecting participants' agency. The question concerning *why participants participate* seems very rarely asked among initiative promoters and scholars alike.

The neglect to participants' agency prevents us from talking about *self-empowerment*, for example. While listening to retrospective accounts about one's own participation in NGO media education projects, I noticed that participation resulted from the search of individuals for opportunities to empower themselves by acquiring more knowledge and skills to deal with everyday constraints peculiar to young people's lives in favelas.

It is certainly not easy to grow up in favelas. Standards of living in favelas vary, but most of the over one thousand favelas in Rio de Janeiro[7] suffer from low-quality public education, failing healthcare and precarious urban infrastructure. In addition, favela residents also suffer from the threats of drug trade and its consequent armed conflicts. Residents, especially the youth, also suffer from generalized discrimination and criminalization outside favelas.

All these contribute to the vicious circle of low-income life in peripheral Rio de Janeiro. Being in a low-income household often includes a high probability of having to drop school to work early to support the household income. Without proper education, one hardly gets well-paying jobs. Such early experiences of adulthood also increase the chances of early parenthood. In such circumstances, children and young people are forced to find ways to increase their chances of avoiding or dealing with as many of these threats and pressures (Custódio, 2016; Jovchelovic & Priego-Hernandez, 2013; Perlman, 2010; Zaluar & Alvito, 2006). It is in such context that NGO pedagogical projects appear as opportunities for self-empowerment.

Adriana, Pedro and Maria participated in different local NGO[8] projects for different self-empowerment reasons. When Adriana was a 14-year-old teenager, she enrolled as a student in an NGO-driven extracurricular course meant to provide educational support for participants to succeed in their formal school education. They also offered older adolescents a preparatory course for university admission tests, which she later joined. In addition, the NGO also maintained a community newspaper. In their website, they claimed the purpose of the newspaper was "to democratize the access to media enabling [favela] dwellers to be actors in the production of new discourses about their living spaces".

For Adriana, however, the perception of the need –passed down by relatives – to acquire professional skills for well-paying jobs and her teenage dream to study at a university led her to check for courses the NGO in her favela had to offer free of charge. She said:

> ADRIANA: "My grandma always told me: 'Adriana, you have to study, to take courses, to prepare. Soon you will be at the age of looking for a job.' So I always tried to spend time studying. If I weren't studying at school, I was taking [extracurricular] computing courses, language courses or telemarketing courses. [...] I never had money to pay for the courses, so I always searched for those places which offered courses for free."

8. Since the 1990s, local NGOs have provided a number of educational and cultural services for favela residents. The NGOs with which I familiarized were mostly started by people with a history as university students and professors in Rio de Janeiro. In some cases, founders were middle class non-favela residents. In others, the founding members had been favela residents before building careers in universities and civil society organizations. To keep projects, NGOs often relied on corporate and state financial support.

In Pedro's case, he was 19 when he joined a photography course organized for young residents of the favela where he lived. The organizer was a photographer who worked in an NGO. When the course ended, Pedro enrolled for further courses at the NGO. According to their website, this organization promotes studies on critical media and photography to "seek to expand the representational repertoire of favelas and the level of democratization of communication."

However, Pedro was led to the first photography course because he needed money. The course was sponsored by a bank foundation. In order to facilitate the regular participation of favela residents in the project, the organizers offered participants a monthly grant. That, according to Pedro, was his main reason to originally participate.

> PEDRO: "What led me [to the project] at the time was that those 100 *reais* for me were the 100 *reais* for the fun, you know. The 100 *reais* to buy whisky at the parties and have fun with the guys. To go out with a girl. That's what I had, you see? Unfortunately, that's what I had."

The 16-year-old Maria heard about the NGO when one of its staff members visited her school to announce their extracurricular courses. This NGO offered courses in photography, video-making and web-design to adolescent favela residents so that they could "use what they learn to know their own communities better" and "to contribute to the local development and the enhancing of quality of living of local youth."

However, the reason Maria decided to enroll was the belief she could expand her modeling hobby to a more serious level. She, in fact, misunderstood what the audiovisual projects meant when she heard about them at school.

> MARIA: "[The NGO worker] said it was a project, an audiovisual course. Then I was like… I think I really fantasized about it. 'Oh, television, working on video…' I remember that at that time I was taking modeling classes. […] So things were mixed, you know. 'A video course! Cool! I can link them [to the modeling lessons].' Only later did I realize that it was nothing like I was thinking. I have [male] friends who today say they thought it was a course to learn how to fix television sets."

The three retrospective accounts of how Adriana, Pedro and Maria entered media education projects show how they wanted to empower themselves in a less political way than the NGO staff had expected when they elaborated the initiatives. For these participants, self-empowerment had a sense of accumulating valuable skills and knowledge for what they felt, as adolescents, to be priorities in their lives at the moment and place in which they lived. Their decision to participate reflected their growing up in a context of constant neoliberal imperatives, consumerist urges and class-based constraints (Souza, 2005). In that sense, by listening to participants' accounts we notice how participation in NGO-driven initiatives happens after decision-making processes, which we easily ignore in research if we exclusively engage with NGO-centered approaches.

5. The Importance of Interactions

Throughout the interviews, I also learned about how interactions motivated Adriana, Pedro and Maria to engage in activist media and journalism. Participants and former participants often told me about how NGO media education projects were more interesting and appealing than regular schools. One difference was that NGOs, inspired by the methodology of Paulo Freire[9] (1987), promoted dynamic courses that combined hands-on media training with sociopolitical discussions. Themes included their condition as favela residents, how media reinforce discrimination about favelas, and how they could use media to construct their own representations of favelas. Participants also learned about human rights and social justice by reflecting about everyday life situations they all experienced.

9. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator internationally recognized as a critical pedagogy proponent. During his lifetime, Freire conceptualized and developed a pedagogical methodology grounded on dialogue to foster the critical thinking about social hierarchies, inequalities and prejudices especially among the poor. Freire believed that by learning and debating about oppressing social structures with their own realities as starting points, people at the bottom of social hierarchies could collectively act as agents in processes of empowerment, interactions and social change (cf. Freire & Vittoria, 2007).

Another important element of the media education projects is that participants were motivated to speak up, to give opinions and to question issues with which they did not necessarily agree. Being listened to was a complete different experience from the silent listening they experienced at regular schools. The opportunity to speak up, the perception that what was spoken mattered and the conflicting nature of the dialogues among participants and educators were fundamental triggers for them to apply their fresh technical and professional skills in sociopolitical actions.

The retrospective accounts of Adriana, Pedro and Maria give further details to how these interactions gave a political meaning to their understanding of media and journalism. When she was 17, Adriana joined the same NGO's preparatory course for the university admission tests. In that project, discussions included themes like the discrimination against favelas in media. They also had lectures by teachers who were also members of social movements. For her, acquiring critical knowledge with other favela residents was life-changing.

> ADRIANA: "We were learning, listening and questioning each other. We wanted to cause changes in [the favela]. We embraced the Landless Workers' Movement and many other movements. We were discovering what the world was. We were united and learning."

The new-found critical awareness led Adriana to volunteer for the NGO's newspaper project. In the newspaper, she learned about reporting, photojournalism and news-writing in learn-by-doing processes with other residents who were more experienced volunteer journalists. During the interview, Adriana emphasized the importance of the newspaper for her to act politically in, through and about media.

> ADRIANA: [Volunteering for the newspaper] made the difference in my life. It made a difference for me to choose a profession and an ideal for life. [...] It is in community media that I can write about how I suffered from hunger and that hunger is not an accident. I can write that favelas are not violent, but that they suffer from violence. That we are not criminals, but criminalized."

Pedro also learned professional skills, in his case photography, combined with sociopolitical knowledge. The project in which he participated also stimulated participants to plan and implement a media initiative on behalf of a favela or local associations. But despite the pedagogical repertoire of the NGO, Pedro highlighted the importance of bonds of trust, friendship and mutual support beyond NGO walls among participants.

> PEDRO: "I built [critical thinking] especially because of the people who were in the places where I was. I believe that was crucial. More important than the academic and the classes is the informal knowledge. The one we exchange at the table of the bar when we are drunk, when we are hanging out or when we are relaxing at home. [...] It is really important because you end up meeting people who naturally start dialogue about what you are looking for. There is a certain affinity that makes you reflect towards something that is much greater. [...] [Of all the projects], what I most highlight are these encounters."

In Maria's case, the thirty young participants in the project lived in three different favelas. Together, they learned how to produce videos and how to apply traditional school subjects to their media training processes. For example, they applied math to evaluate production costs and geography to reflect on their own favelas while producing videos. By participating the media education project, she felt she was simultaneously making and experiencing change.

> MARIA: "For me the changes I made were very concrete. At [the favela] we made videos, but also promoted a number of actions, like trash collection. These were the changes I saw. There were no theoretical or methodological issues. [Our actions were] something that made me feel good, that I liked, but I had no clue where they would lead me. They made sense to me at that stage."

These accounts demonstrate how interactions among participants are important for the engagement in CSFC initiatives. Interacting –in their case, engaging in critical and conflicting dialogues and actions with peer participants, educators and other favela residents– is a crucial complement for the taught elements of NGO-driven media education. In these types of interactions, participants are not mere apprentices, but agents who mutually support each other in their own processes of engagement in activist media and journalism.

6. Conclusion: The usefulness of Ethnography for CFSC Evaluation

In this article, I analyzed some nuances of participation in NGO pedagogic initiatives and the engagement in communication for social change (CFSC) among low-income youth in favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. By reflecting on the retrospective accounts of Adriana, Pedro and Maria –three former participants of NGO projects currently active in media activism– I show (a) how the participation in NGO-driven media education represented acts for self-empowerment among favela youth and (b) how interactions inside and outside the projects among peer participants were fundamental elements for their sociopolitical engagement in, about and through media.

Methodologically, this article demonstrates how ethnography can be useful for processes of evaluation of CFSC initiatives. In this case, ethnography enabled a qualitative and participant-centered approach to the relationship between NGOs and favela youth who had participated in media-educational processes. In general, ethnographic approaches can "help us focus on how communication, media and social change are experienced and made meaningful in particular sites [...] by engaging with people on their own terms in ways that challenge researchers' preconceived frames, classifications, knowledge, and interpretations" (Tacchi, 2016:126).

In terms of evaluation, ethnography can contribute to nuanced approaches that explore the unpredictable and complex nature of CFSC processes rather than simplistically trying to measure cause-and-effect results of preplanned interventions and their expected outcomes (Tacchi & Rennie, 2014). In this article, I have shown how the ethnographic analysis of Adriana's, Pedro's and Maria's experiences in NGO-driven media education processes can be useful to develop theories in the field of CFSC research, to provide resources for NGO's self-evaluation and strategic development, and most importantly, to promote the direct (e.g. as part of evaluating teams) and indirect (e.g. through surveys and questionnaires) inclusion of participants' perspectives in evaluation processes.

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Biography

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