Marginalized Women Speak: 
Using Biographical Performances to Inform Development Research, Programs, and Policies

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Introduction

Women who are excluded from decision-making within families, communities, and nations are often the very targets of development programs designed to improve their lives (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2006). All too often these women—usually poor and unable to read or write—have positions within family and community structures that are shaped and defined by inequitable gender roles and expectations. This ensures they are not given voice. Their stories— their lived experiences—are pieced together and communicated by others (Tedlock, 2000), thus providing a filtered and all too often incomplete picture of what concerns and challenges the most marginalized and poorest of women.

The complex challenges of understanding social structures and norms are part and parcel of the research process (Diamond, 2009; Donato, 2005; Gubrium, 2012; Mead, 1973; Suttles, 1968). However, it must be noted that this process creates a situation whereby researchers are unlikely to identify the most marginalized women and hear their stories (Rist, 2000). As a result, researchers fail to capture the richly detailed data that reveal the assistance these women need and why they need it. This is eloquently illustrated in the following example from Swaziland.

For over 30 years, the Family Life Association of Swaziland (FLAS), a non-government, non-profit organization and member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, has provided sexual and reproductive health care throughout Swaziland (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2015). Despite the program’s various positive outputs, women’s stories, proverbs, and conversations about FLAS illustrate traditional women’s distaste towards FLAS’s family planning programs. While researchers most often point to the patriarchal structures as the explanation for the failure of development programs, in the case of FLAS’s family planning program in Swaziland, its failure is actually the women’s interpretation of and meaning attached to limiting the number of children they bear. In response to FLAS’s family planning interventions, traditional Swazi women composed the proverb “Kwandza kwaliwa bakaFLAS” (“family expansion is opposed by FLAS”). This
proverb is a revision of the original Swazi proverb, “Kwandza kwaliwa batsakatsi” (“family expansion is opposed by witches”). The original proverb condemns witches for using supernatural powers to kill community members, thus stunting community growth and prosperity. In the revised proverb, the women equate FLAS’s family planning programs to witchcraft because the program “kills” or curtails the continuity of Swazi families by limiting the number of children one should bear. The women use this proverb in a variety of contexts such as community gatherings, storytelling sessions, and day-to-day conversation or speech performance acts. For instance, when they wish person prosperity, they may say, “Unlike the FLAS people who oppose continuity, I wish you all the best in life.” Though this context is usually optimistic and joyous, the subtle reference to FLAS as an institution that opposes cultural values and norms indicates the women’s dislike of the family planning interventions provided by FLAS.

While all Swazi women use these proverbs, it is the poorest women who most rely on these verbal exchanges to debate and discuss their reservations about the program. These are the women who cannot read or write, are least apt to access formal information on FLAS, and the least likely to engage with program evaluators and personnel.

This is also the group of women and their expressions of concern that most often elude researchers. These women see their role as ensuring prosperity for Swazi families generally and their families specifically. The FLAS program and researchers have missed the true concerns of the women it targets, especially the most marginalized women. They have failed to explain and educate women about how limiting or controlling reproduction is, in fact, consistent with familial prosperity. As a result, researchers have missed two opportunities thus far:

i. Fully understanding why the program is not as successful as it might be

ii. Designing and implementing educational and incentive structures that address the real barriers for program success.

Gaps in Mainstream Methods
The standard array of research methods including general population surveys, household surveys, focus groups, and content analysis, as well as open-ended and semi-structured interviews with respondents and key informants, all frequently overlook the lived experiences of the most marginalized women (Rist, 2000). While qualitative methodologies provide researchers with knowledge of people’s lived experiences, too often the data gathering or sampling techniques identify subjects who are not among the most marginalized women in a setting (Rist, 2000; Quisumbing et. al., 2014). Even participant observation studies often fail to include the most marginalized women. This is, in part, explained by women’s lack of power. For example, women, especially the poorest and least educated, often must seek permission from family members or elders to talk with researchers, and frequently have their responses monitored by those same elders and male family members. In addition, they must face their own discomfort due to economic and engendered power dynamics between researchers and participants (Abdelali-Martini & Aw-Hassan, 2013; Quisumbing et. al., 2014). Moreover, participating in a research study requires time, and the most marginalized women have next to no free time (Abdelali-Martini & Aw-Hassan, 2013). Their in-home responsibilities coupled with labor market and/or external caregiving responsibilities leave little time to talk with researchers.

Researchers have identified data sources designed to capture the lived experiences of women too busy to participate in studies. These sources, including documents, journals, and diaries, often provide illuminating and richly detailed information (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Peräkylä, 2005). However, the limitations of qualitative methods must be critically analyzed and evaluated by deciding upon the appropriate methods to use in the case of women who are the
most marginalized—namely those who are unable to read and write. Any data source that requires the subject to be able to read and write will exclude these women (Brady, 2000; Peräkylä, 2005).

**Biographical Performances as a Tool for Data Collection**

In order to tap into the lived experiences and priorities of the poorest, least educated, most marginalized women, we must turn to a data source that gives these women voice. These women express their concerns and needs, transfer knowledge, and support each other through storytelling, songs, dances, poetry, proverbs, and riddles (Okpewho, 1992; Senkoro, 2005; Tedlack, 2000; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). It is these utterances that provide insight into what most concerns these women in their daily lives (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It is in the oral transmission of information in everyday life—conversation, comments, stories, proverbs, riddles, song—that the most marginalized women reveal their true lived experiences and thoughts about the barriers and challenges they face, as well as the solutions necessary for overcoming them.

There is a long tradition of using the oral tradition to understand the history, norms, rituals, and social structures within families and communities (Berg & Lune, 2004; Peräkylä, 2005; Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Tedlock, 2000). In order to capture what the essence of what women, even the most marginalized, are facing in their lives, we propose using biographical performances by women. These performances reveal the stories of women’s current life situations. Specifically, women engaging in biographical performances focus on the here and now, their daily lived experiences, and their anticipation of the future. Biographical
performances reveal the existing stories and everyday realities of women and their communities.

Biographical performances differ from oral tradition in that the oral tradition is part of understanding history, culture, and the past, as well as passing from one generation to another requisite information, norms, and values. Oral tradition functions to depict life as it was, showing both a connection to and distance from the present. Biographical performances, as a methodology, also differ from auto-ethnography (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2000) and from oral histories (Berg, Lune & Lune, 2004). Rather than data obtained through researcher-driven interview guides or questionnaires or through performances by researchers, biographical performances situate women’s unprompted stories at the epicenter of data collection.

While biographical performances are not limited to women who cannot read or write, they are a data gathering technique that captures how the most marginalized women and their families live. Through understanding the lives and experiences as well as challenges and barriers faced by all women, including the most marginalized, we will be better positioned to structure current and future programs, policies, incentive structures, and economic allocations in more meaningful ways. Moreover, this strategy of collecting data penetrates the environment of the poorest and most marginalized in a manner that does not merely capture the voices of marginalized women. It allows us to listen to and observe the priorities, concerns, and barriers they identify and share with each other without the juxtaposition of researcher/subject power dynamics. Additionally, there is potential to circumnavigate social desirability bias in data collection because the data derived from biographical performances are
passively communicated to the researcher through a subject’s relationships and sharing with her peers. The researcher is there to listen and learn not to question or direct.

Because it is these women and families that are most often the targets of development programs, not elevating biographical performances to a valid and credible data collection tool increases the probability that policies, interventions, and evaluations will not include relevant data from the very populations targeted.

**Contributions of Biographical Performances**

Biographical performances add layers to the development context by ensuring that the needs and priorities of all women, and therefore families, are included in the research agenda. This data collection tool provides access to systematic and valid data from women who, for a variety of reasons, are all too often barred from traditional data collection methodologies. While barriers such as illiteracy as well as lack of time, power, and agency will continue to prohibit marginalized women from formally and fully participating in development policy research projects, adopting biographical performance as one of many data collection methods ensures that the voices of these women will begin to be identified, heard, and incorporated into the design of policies, programs, and allocation of resources.

**Recommendations**

In order to integrate biographical performances into development policy research, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Provide policy researchers training on appropriate data collection and interpretation of biographical performance data.
   a) Although biographical performances data yield culturally and contextually specific information that is otherwise difficult to obtain, a researcher who
lacks the understanding of the respective culture and context may misconstrue the meaning of data collected.

2. Create an archive of women’s biographical performances, including stories, songs, proverbs, and poems, that is publicly available to researchers, policy analysts, evaluators, advocates, community leaders, academics and other relevant actors.
   a) Archives could take various forms, including digital audio and digitized print. Identifying a home, such as WGGP at UIUC, for such an archive is imperative for development research.

3. Structure incentives so that researcher will include biographical performance data in monitoring and evaluation studies.
   a) Understanding women's stories of disconnect between development solutions and social and cultural norms, or relationships between practitioners and targeted recipients will evolve the meaning and utility of outcome and output reports (Rog, 2012; Vaterlaus and Higginbottom, 2011).
References


