The Importance of a Good Day and the Value of a Bad Day: An Ethnographic Study of Women’s Enterprise Groups

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In 2011 I began research with an organisation that worked to bring together a number of women from low-income communities to form ‘self-reliant groups’ (SRGs). The organisation presented the forming of such groups as the first step in a process that would enable women to start businesses and in turn improve the socio-economic status of themselves, their families and communities. My ethnographic study and analysis has revealed some of the difficulties in achieving this goal. I argue that there are some key barriers to starting a business given the wider socio-political context and the ways in which groups have defined themselves and found meaning in their activities. Without addressing such barriers business development will remain elusive.

While the business aims have yet to be met the SRG members continue to see enormous value in their involvement in the groups and the organisation remain confident in of the positive contribution they are making in their work to support SRGs. The two narrative vignettes (Humphreys, 2005) that I present within this paper will highlight the distinctive value of ethnography for understanding the contradiction between the failure to meet a vital aim and the continued enthusiasm and confidence in the endeavour.

Within the epistemic operations of ethnography is the focus on mapping the processes of being and becoming in which ‘social realities are realised, objects objectified, materialities materialized, essences essentialized’ (Comaroff, 2010: 530). In my first vignette I recall the turning point within my research when one such process was uncovered as I realised that the activity of joint savings represented far more than simply the action of handing over £1.

In the second vignette I describe an episode in which the importance of being a participant observer became clear and I gained vital insight into one of the key experiences described by SRG members. Many women had talked about the way the activities of the SRG improved their levels of stress, mood and in some cases their health. Until I had my own bad day I had not fully appreciated the significance that women placed on ‘doing something’.
