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The Seductive Nature of Participatory Research: Reflecting on More than a Decade of Work with Marginalized Migrants in South Africa

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the seductive nature of a participatory approach to research with marginalized migrant populations in South Africa. We outline the opportunities offered by such an approach while at the same time emphasizing the need for caution by showing how the ambitions of participatory research can sometimes be (mis)applied as a panacea for all of the tensions inherent in knowledge-production processes, including those associated with the extractive nature of research. We do this by drawing on our experiences in the development, implementation, and utilization of arts-based research undertaken in collaboration with international and domestic migrants in South Africa as part of the MoVE (method.visual.explore) project based at the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), Wits University. Established in 2013, MoVE explores the idea of 'participatory' migration research. We reflect on how we were initially seduced by the idea of participation and show how we are working to strengthen our research praxis through continuously interrogating and reconfiguring our understanding of the opportunities—and limitations—associated with a participatory approach to research.

Keywords: *migration; participatory research; arts-based research; photovoice; social justice.*

Introduction

Participatory research (PR) encompasses a wide range of study approaches that aim to bring researchers and research participants together to examine a problematic situation, action or issue (Milne, 2016). Advocates of PR seek to break down the traditionally hierarchical barriers between those positioned as the 'researcher' and 'researched' (Tuck & Wang, 2012) to create projects of social relevance for the people and communities involved (Moletsane et al., 2017). Whilst a social justice-driven approach to academic scholarship and efforts to increase participants' agency in the research process are welcomed, we question the extent to which PR practitioners—including ourselves—are able to effectively operationalize the democratic ideals of working 'with' rather than 'on' those whose lifeworlds are under investigation. The term participatory research is powerfully seductive, and it is often (mis)read as meaning that benign, less intrusive research is being conducted. Yet, PR endeavors are frequently riddled with more ethical dilemmas than other forms of research. Participant anonymity cannot be guaranteed in community-based work and researchers need to navigate the often harsh and unpredictable daily realities of the people we work with (Walsh, 2014). Crucially, PR is premised as an emancipatory approach to research (Fine, 2008), requiring that we not only address the micro-politics of everyday interactions where power inequalities

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pervade, but that we also carefully consider ways of ethically and respectfully 'giving back' to those who help us with our questions (Swartz, 2011).

In this article, we reflect on over a decade of involvement in PR approaches to working with diverse migrant populations in South Africa. We do not go into detail about the various projects as these are discussed in detail elsewhere[3]. Instead, we examine the 'hidden politics' that often lie behind the decision to adopt a PR framework and show that while we remain firmly committed to engaging in social-justice driven work, we question whether research can ever be truly participatory or emancipatory. Romanticized notions of PR as a power-free mode of knowledge production can blind us to the ethical and methodological challenges inherent in the framework. Ultimately, we encourage a wider consideration of what participation can mean, including exploring the opportunities presented when we expand our understanding beyond the simple inclusion of those who are often positioned as subjects/objects of research, to also recognizing the role of meaningful collaborations with social movements, civil society organizations, qualified facilitators and trainers, artists, and other partners involved in a PR project.

Arts-based research

One approach to PR is arts-based research: a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across disciplines during all (or some) stages of the research process, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation (Leavy, 2009). Arts-based study practices draw on visual art, literary writing, music, film, performance, and various representational forms (outputs or artefacts), that can include photo-stories, collages, fictional and non-fictional narratives, paintings, zines, poems, documentaries (Lenette, 2019).

While there are multiple intersecting forms of power that operate concurrently in all research processes, the arts (in all of its various forms and mediums) offer alternative ways of "knowing, doing, and making" (Pinar, 2004, p. 9) that are not possible in other research traditions. When applied with care, arts-based strategies can provide participants an opportunity to actively engage in research, including controlling the ways they want to explore, portray, and represent their issues of concern and lived experiences (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018). This 'bottom-up' approach is, however, rarely the unmitigated delight that some might like to believe or imagine. Power between researchers and participants is in constant flux, which can create discomfort for academics that are used to directing the research process. A PR approach argues that participants should be the ones to determine what knowledge is produced, how it is produced, and what they want to share with researchers and wider publics (Kindon et al., 2007), but this 'openness' can give rise to layered tensions, particularly when research ethics designed to protect participants is in conflict with the emancipatory goals of PR. In such situations, what role and responsibility does the researcher hold compared to the rights of participants? For example, when working with migrant groups who hold irregular (illegal) documentation statuses and/or are involved in criminalized livelihood activities, such as sex work, who has the duty of care to determine what a participant can share (or not) with public audiences? What are the opportunities and dangers inherent in making visible the spaces and lives of people who face stigma, discrimination, possible arrest, detention and/or deportation? How do researchers and participants navigate the tensions that might arise? An arts-based approach to research attempts to centralize the needs and concerns of participants and is one way of working

[3] For example, see: Ripero-Muñiz & Fayad, 2016; Oliveira, 2018a, 2018b; Oliveira et al., 2016; Oliveira & Vearey, 2017b, 2016; Oliveira & Walker, 2019; Schuler et al., 2016; Walker & Clacherty, 2014; Vearey, 2010; Vearey et al., 2011.

towards the intention that they "are not misrepresented through shallow, monocled gazes" (Swartz, 2011, p. 49). Yet analyses of PR often focus on attempts to determine whether processes were collaborative enough or whether the researcher shared power. Few interrogate *where* the knowledge actually goes, and for whom and why (Walsh, 2014).

The MoVE (method.visual.explore) project

Since 2006, researchers at the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS)[4], an interdisciplinary research centre at the Wits University in Johannesburg, have engaged in a wide range of participatory arts-based projects with diverse migrant populations in rural and urban areas of South Africa[5]. Many of these projects form part of MoVE (method.visual.explore), an experimental research space at the ACMS that we established in 2013 (Oliveira & Vearey, 2017a).

MoVE projects investigate different ways of conceptualizing, undertaking, and disseminating research that explores the lived experiences of marginalized migrant populations through collaboration with migrant participants, social movements, civil society organizations, qualified facilitators and trainers, artists, and research students. Importantly, MoVE is about exploring if and how the *process* of participation in arts-based research can improve understandings of the everyday experiences of migrant groups. The creative outputs that result from such processes are, however, not viewed as data nor analyzed as such.

To date, all MoVE projects have been conducted in partnership with migrant populations that are typically excluded, under-represented, or misrepresented in research, policy, and public debates. The aim of MoVE is therefore two-fold. Firstly, projects are designed to explore the use of participatory arts-based approaches, alongside other qualitative research strategies, to better understand the lived experiences (and needs) of marginalized migrant groups. Secondly, MoVE projects support participants, in collaboration with civil society partners, to generate creative outputs for public engagement[6].

The seduction of participation

Before establishing MoVE, each of us had previously used arts-based approaches in our work with migrant persons in South Africa. In 2006, Jo used participatory photography and filmmaking (alongside other methods) to explore the interlinked urban challenges of migration, HIV, and informal housing in Johannesburg (Vearey, 2010). This included partnering with 20 people living in migrant worker hostels, informal settlements, and subdivided flats in the inner city, and the Market Photo Workshop[7] (MPW), a Johannesburg-based photography school with extensive experience conducting community-based projects. The photographs captured by participants provided insight into the complex urban spaces that they negotiate daily. Their images made visible the spaces they *chose* to share, and critically, the spaces that Jo, as an outsider, could not access. Equally important were the photographs that participants did not take, and those that they took but did not want to share with the research team or future public audiences. These spaces and images remain invisible, both figuratively and metaphorically.

[4] http://www.migration.org.za/

[5] For example, see Clacherty, 2019; Dill et al., 2016; Huschke, 2017; Ripero-Muñiz & Fayad, 2016; Schuler, 2016; Schuler et al., 2016; Schuler & Oliveira, 2018; Walker & Oliveira, 2015.

[6] https://www.mahpsa.org/arts-based-research/move/

[7] https://marketphotoworkshop.co.za/

As part of the project, the research team—including the participants who took the photographs—selected a total of 80 images for a public exhibition entitled *Hidden Spaces*[8]. These selections were printed and mounted onto polystyrene blocks, ensuring that the exhibition was mobile and reusable. Participants designed the exhibition so that they could share a curated selection of photographs with their local Ward Councilor. Many chose images that illustrated their poor living conditions, hoping this would lead to action from local government. Whilst the exhibition was viewed and used to generate discussion, no action emerged, resulting in deepening the frustrations that participants held about how they are marginalized by city authorities. Inevitably, these tensions gave rise to questions about who benefited from such an approach: Jo gained insights for her research but what was gained for the participants who provided their labour? As an enthusiastic and naïve public health doctoral student, the language of (in)visibility was not sufficiently understood or interrogated by Jo and other members of the research team before the project began. Although Jo acknowledged these absences, it was only with *time* and critical reflection on the idea of 'participation', collaboration, and representation that the limitations of a participatory photo approach to improving her understanding of the spaces and lives that she was studying were better able to surface. Simultaneously, Jo developed an appreciation of the agency that such an approach offered participants, who, ultimately, hold the power in choosing what they want to share and not. These layered insights, and accompanying disappointment in the reality of a 'participatory' approach is what pushed Jo to further interrogate her research praxis.

Elsa experienced similar tensions during her initial exposure to PR. In 2010, she coordinated an adapted photovoice project with 11 women migrants who lived and worked as sex workers in Hillbrow, Johannesburg's most densely populated suburb. The project, entitled *Working the City: Experiences of Migrant Women in Inner City Johannesburg*[9] involved partnership with the ACMS, MPW, and the Sisonke National Sex Worker Movement[10] (South Africa's sex worker-led movement). It drew on lessons learned from *Hidden Spaces* and formed part of Elsa's doctoral research, which explored the lived experiences of sex worker migrants in South Africa and the ways less traditional research approaches might be used to generate more respectful research, engagement, and dissemination 'with' rather than 'on' adults engaged in sex work. Since its official opening in August 2011, the Working the City exhibition—12 A1 posters, one for each participant and one explaining the project—has travelled all over the world and researchers, activists, and the media are still requesting images. While these requests indicate a need for more research that centralizes the multiplicity of sex workers' voices and self-representations, the costs required to print and curate a space to display the posters has made them difficult to replicate, especially for a grassroots organization like Sisonke. Moreover, although each participant selected their own pseudonym, and wrote captions and a short narrative to accompany their final image selections for public consumption, giving cameras to sex workers and asking them to photograph aspects of their lives placed them and their communities at risk (Oliveira, 2016). Not only is photography a craft that requires *time* to teach and learn, some of the participants also felt frustrated with the photographic medium, particularly when issues of safety prevented them from visually documenting aspects of their lives that they wanted to capture and/or share with public audiences, such as police violence.

[8] For a detailed description of 'Hidden Spaces' please see Vearey, 2010
[9] For a detailed description of 'Working the City' please see Oliveira, 2016; Oliveira & Vearey, 2015; Vearey et al., 2011.
[10] http://www.sweat.org.za/what-we-do/sisonke/

Photographic evidence of illegal activities can reveal survival strategies to those who oppress them. Images of clients, the places where sex work is conducted, or crossing international borders through informal channels, for example, could have incriminated the participants (and their communities) had the research team not scrutinized the content of their selections before they were released into the public. Efforts to address these (and other) methodological and ethical challenges, made visible through the adoption of a participatory photo approach, is what sits at the heart of Elsa's ongoing research with sex workers and migrants. Subsequent MoVE projects that she has conceptualized and designed, including those involving ACMS/Sisonke partnership, have prioritized the responsible use of images by combining multimodal storytelling activities over the use of a single visual methodology, such as photography or film. Critical to these efforts have been the implementation of strategies aimed at reducing participant's risk and research designs that support the production of accessible outputs that participants and Sisonke can use for their own purposes (Schuler & Oliveira, 2018).

The personal is political

The projects briefly described above reflect our attempts at responding to the frustrations that we hold about the methods and ethics associated with research seeking to explore and document the lived experiences of marginalized migrants. While our disciplinary backgrounds and respective personal and professional experiences differ (as do those of all involved in MoVE) we are both interested in interrogating the politics of knowledge production and working towards a research practice that recognizes and engages our layered (sometimes conflicting) personal histories and subjectivities. As feminists, we understand that our identities interact and weave through our work: Elsa is an Angolan-born queer woman, now permanent South African resident, who grew up in the USA before moving to Johannesburg in 2010 to undertake postgraduate studies at Wits University, where she currently works as a postdoctoral researcher after completing a PhD in Migration and Displacement; Jo, a British-born woman who has been living in South Africa for over 16 years and is now a permanent resident, completed her doctoral studies (Public Health) at Wits University, where she is now an Associate Professor and Director of the ACMS.

Negotiating the 'hidden politics' of participatory research

Although working in collaborative environments has many tangible and intangible politically important benefits, there are multiple 'hidden politics' that often lie behind the use/adoption of a PR framework (Walsh, 2014). The phrase *participatory research* connotes a worldview that explicitly recognizes both researchers and participants as co-creators in an experimental process of knowledge production (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). But—as we outlined earlier—there are tensions in the ideologies that PR proposes, and the language that is often used to describe research participants and processes. One of the attractions to PR is its potential to support social change and empowerment by 'giving voice' to marginalized communities (Kindon et al., 2007). Although projects that are grounded in emancipatory goals, such as those featured in MoVE, "create friction with a social science that continues to be dominated by a positivist, conservative scientific paradigm" (Duckett & Pratt 2001, p. 832) there is danger in obfuscating the links between 'speaking for oneself' and social change. Placing the burden of social change on (marginalized) individuals not only implicitly blames them for their misfortune(s), it also discounts the role that neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism play in sustaining structural violence (Walsh, 2014).

Another tension in PR ideologies is that the ethical obligations of collaborative scholarship are often placed on an assumption of inequality between researchers and participants. Yet, to achieve inter-subjective moments of communication, which PR emphasizes, both researchers and participants need to be considered equal speaking subjects. This assumption of equality is not only an ethical move; it opens up intellectual and practical spaces for research as political, meaning that research itself always engages in we/they negotiations that produce and are produced by power (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). To view relationships as unidirectional, where the researcher has all of the power and participants have none, is to simplify notions of power (Foucault, 1980). It is also incredibly patronizing to participants. Power dynamics are not static; rather power balances shift at different points in all relationships (De Certeau, 1984). An assumed equality is also what participants often insist in their demands for self-representation. Extolling the benefits of PR under the banner of 'giving voice' implies that voice is a commodity for researchers to give or take. Instead, as Arundhati Roy (2004) explained during her Sydney Peace Prize lecture, "There's no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Of course, there are rhetorical differences between being silenced and choosing silence as a deliberate form of expression (Motsemme, 2004). Recognizing the political power of silence (albeit nuanced at times) is critical to expounding participants' subjectivities and the situated context of research. The political rhetoric of silence shares parallels with de Certeau's (1984) idea of strategies and tactics. In other words, silence can be used to manipulate, control, denigrate, and harm others just as easily as to protect the self and one's ideologies. Attending to the political rhetoric of silence can deepen our understandings of the complex social environments that migrants negotiate, including their reasons for choosing visibility and invisibility tactics in research and the outputs they select for public audiences.

Unfortunately, it is easy for researchers to redefine participant's decisions to share (or not) certain outputs; thus manipulating the representation of experiences that participants share with researchers. The responsibility of PR researchers lies in upholding the fair representation of participants in determining what can be made visible, to whom, when, and how. Yet, when it comes to dissemination, power often plays out in different ways. For example, participants may select materials that do not reflect what the researcher believes to be important, or the imperatives of research ethics may mean that researchers are unwilling to make certain materials public (Oliveira & Vearey, 2015).

Participation in research

The situated and dynamic nature of PR often means that there is rarely a straightforward way of proceeding (Berngold & Thomas, 2012). While other research traditions, such as ethnography also work in spaces and relations that are not always clear-cut, these are further complicated in PR projects where researchers may position participants as 'informants' *and* 'collaborators' (Dill et al., 2016). Formal and informal encounters that result from a PR approach can promote a sense of trust and/or friendship. While 'closeness' is not in and of itself a negative attribute of PR it can pose challenges when it comes to delineating a research space and the research process. Indeed, PR projects often reveal more than what we capture. How, then, does one decide what can or should be considered data, and who decides? While some of these questions can be addressed during the development of collaboration agreements and consent processes, even the most flexible and iterative of these are rarely malleable enough to adjust to the multiple shifts in relations and contexts that often occur in PR projects (Lenette et al., 2019).

Although a central aim of PR is to promote democracy and equality (Fine, 2008), the literature often fails to engage with the intricacies of the relationships that develop in PR environments, even though they often become muddled over time (Mayan & Daum, 2016). Democracy and equality are culturally informed notions that often need to be negotiated, particularly if hierarchical collectivism prevails in a community (Brannelly & Boulton, 2017). While PR strategies have the potential to trouble settled worldviews by posing questions about who has the power to speak (Caretta & Riaño, 2016) it is also critical that researchers question Eurocentric understandings of 'democracy' so that we might gain more nuanced understandings of the ways it functions (or not) in everyday life.

Prioritizing an ethics of care

Our research praxis is deeply entwined in feminist notions of care and personal/political commitments to addressing oppression both within and outside university spaces. The three core principles currently guiding research ethics—consent, confidentiality, and protection—have made a vital contribution to 'do no harm' research, but formal ethical review bodies still tend to overlook other equally important principles, such an ethic of care in their governance of researchers' ethical behavior (Manzo & Brightbill, 2014). In an ethic of care, morality is seen as enabling effective engagement rather than as a constraint that limits individual pursuits (Held, 1995). Over the years, MoVE participants have expressed great pride in their involvement in research (Patience, 2019) and the outputs they produced for public audiences (Kagee, 2016). Many have described the importance of 'speaking truth to power' (Kg Loo, 2016) and witnessing various publics engage with their works (Tanaka, 2016), yet at the same time struggle with wanting public recognition and needing/wanting to remain anonymous. These experiences of internal dissonance are especially prolific for participants who are involved in illegal livelihood strategies, such as sex work, and/or who hold irregular documentation statuses (Schuler, 2016).

Although there are risks in being associated with any kind of research if participants' confidentiality and anonymity is not respected, arts-based researchers need to think carefully and critically about whether recognition is ever ethical, both in the moment and beyond the lifetime of a study (Mitchell, 2011). This is especially critical for researchers new to the field of visual methodologies, who, are sometimes quick to celebrate the ordinariness of participants' involvement (see Huschke, 2017). Once a visual image is created it becomes nearly impossible to control its use and/or to remove it from the public domain if a participant decides that they no longer want to be represented "in a fixed visual trope for time immemorial" (Brady & Brown, 2013, p.102).

After years of engagement in MoVE, we have come to conceptualize project workshops as 'suspended in time'—safe spaces that almost hover above and beyond the harshness of everyday life. While these are important spaces to cultivate and nourish, it is also vital that researchers follow up with participants after workshops end to ensure that their final selections are still what they want to share with public audiences (Oliveira, 2019). Giving participants an opportunity to review and revise their outputs, including removing images from archives and/or tearing out pages from narrative journals that they do not want the researcher to read or access is a humanizing stance that values mutuality, kindness, respect, and connectedness between everyone involved: researchers, participants, and their communities (Gilligan, 1982). It is also an ethic of care stance that accepts responsibility for the safety and fair representation of participants. Reviewing outputs can be laborious, time-consuming, and emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually draining for researchers under pressure to publish and fundraise, but it is critical to ensuring that the lives of those we work with are respected and valued.

Final thoughts

A PR approach to research has the potential to disrupt "the traditional colonizing methodologies that have been the hallmarks of social science research for centuries" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 35). Substituting relatively narrow research methods with those that are respectful to participants is an important part of the knowledge-decolonizing-humanizing agenda that is every researcher's responsibility, irrespective of discipline or location. While a PR approach is not, in and of itself, fundamentally distinct from other qualitative research procedures, or a panacea for resolving power imbalances, the ideas and ambitions it proposes force us to engage with the 'hidden politics' of knowledge production in radical, confronting ways. While we are firm advocates for using arts-based approaches to explore issues collaboratively we are cognizant that we must keep a critical eye open for weaknesses, limitations, and dangers. Although we continue to grapple with some of PR's ideologies (and the politics of knowledge more broadly) the one thing we are certain of is that researchers need to push beyond the seductive nature of PR. We must be willing to interrogate our (sometimes slippery and elusive) neoliberal assumptions and agendas so that we might push the limits of a radical politics both within and beyond academia. For us, this includes interrogating the very idea that knowledge can ever be co-produced. The language of co-production suggests that knowledge is *to be* produced but knowledge already exists; participants are the knowers of their lives (Vearey, 2019). Perhaps co-production is actually about working collaboratively to curate knowledge in shareable forms that can reach different audiences? Like all knowledge-making processes, PR is messy, highly variable, and contingent. Acknowledging the power of the seductive language of participation and rethinking the ambitions of PR does, however, present multiple opportunities for reflecting, interrogating, and improving our research praxis.

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