

244 Reflections on the complexities of using participatory methods for higher education research in South Africa

Mikateko Mathebula, Faith Mkwanzani

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

In participatory research projects, gatekeepers play a key role in facilitating access to potential participants and research sites. However, the relationship built between researchers and gate keepers can be fraught with tensions that disrupt the quality of research. In this paper, we reflect on the challenges we faced in building a cooperative relationship with a community-based organisation. Our reflections are based on a project where photovoice was used to explore the pursuit of higher education for youth from an informal settlement in South Africa. In these reflections, we highlight the importance of enabling the development of narrative capabilities through photovoice (Walker and Mathebula, 2020) and argue that narrative capabilities should be foregrounded in the normative descriptions of applying photovoice in higher education research (Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas, 2021) particularly in the South African context.

Full paper

Although aimed at empowering participants and reducing power inequalities between researchers and beneficiaries, participatory research projects can contribute to the reproduction of the injustices they attempt to rectify. This is often replicated in cases when the relationships built between research stakeholders reproduce power imbalances and result in outcomes that benefit researchers and funders more than the communities they seek to serve. As African scholars who have been working with participatory methods in higher education research and youth studies in South Africa and Zimbabwe, we enter research relationships with the aim to enrich human development outcomes for all stakeholders. However participatory projects involve differently situated actors who have diverse worldviews, come from different geographic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts and are thus guided by varying ideologies and goals. Moreover, factors such as funder expectations, tight time frames, funding and bureaucratic processes often hinder the full achievement of valued outcomes as envisioned by local communities.

Building and maintaining cooperation between stakeholders in participatory projects is therefore a complex challenge, and while participatory research can and does contribute to capability expansion and epistemic justice (Walker and Boni, 2020) we are aware that for it to do so, the relational dimension of knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing processes should be fostered by an imperfect ethics of care. This is particularly important when the goal is to enhance the narrative capabilities (Watts, 2008) of participants, by allowing them to construct and share their stories in ways that they have reason to value. However, methodologies such as photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) are often imposed on research participants (without giving them a wider range of storytelling methodologies to choose from) and they do not celebrate storytelling modes that are less reliant on technology, and more indigenous to the global South (e.g., folklore, oral histories). Equally, themes and areas of research are dictated by funding bodies and/or researchers' interests and not always negotiated or aligned with communities' priorities, needs and interests.

This paper therefore explores what it would mean for relationships founded for the purposes of participatory research to be mutually beneficial and sustainable, although imperfect in praxis, in the face of dynamics that often privilege the agendas, positionalities, skills and knowledge of researchers or facilitators of higher education research projects. The paper also critically reflects on how the effective freedom to tell one's own story, or narrative capability is shaped by the methodologies typically employed in participatory research projects involving youth. How can we think about relationships that look different and that support a cooperative space to foster the narrative capabilities and agency that diverse stakeholders value contextually during and beyond participatory projects? In taking up this question, our paper draws conceptually on the capability approach (Sen, 1999), but specifically on Michael Watts' work on narrative capability, to unpack the challenges and opportunities to initiate and maintain cooperative research relationships and

foster narrative capabilities between actors differently situated within: non-profit and community-based organisations; higher education institutions; and local communities.

We thus discuss the possibilities and limitations of enhancing narrative capabilities through photovoice (Walker and Mathebula, 2021) by reflecting on the successes and failures of partnering with a community-based organisation for the purposes of research. We describe the challenges faced in building a productive relationship and working with a community-based organisation in our SRHE-funded project (2022-2023) that explored the dynamics of pursuing higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion. The project involved 12 youth from an informal settlement/developing township in the Free State province of South Africa. The community-based organisation acted as a gatekeeper to the community from which the youth come, and photovoice was used to explore what attempts to access higher education looked like for the youth, and how this was affected by where they come from. The data collection methods involved an introductory workshop, individual interviews, a series of photovoice workshops, group discussions, and a public exhibition. During the photovoice workshops the youth received photography training, and documented through photographs their past experiences, present opportunities, and aspirations for higher education. A key objective of photovoice is to stimulate critical dialogue. However, discussions that were politically charged, or critical of local government were discouraged by the community-based organisation, and so the youth were hindered from freely telling their stories during the workshops, thereby challenging the autonomy of the participants and researchers. In this paper we address these, and other complexities of employing participatory methodologies in higher education research projects in South Africa.

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