

Working as facilitators and co-researchers: Opportunities, tensions and complexities in educational participatory research

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Abstract

In this paper, we transcend the boundaries of conventional academic writing and embrace the African philosophical concept of conversationalism to create an honest and decolonial space, albeit imperfect, in which we can talk about the messiness of participatory research. Engaging in a dialectical conversation with each other, we share our reflections on and respond to four lines of questioning related to: onto-epistemology; axiology; methodology; and temporality within participatory research. As we converse, we draw on lessons learnt from three different photovoice projects that involved working with marginalized youth or within marginalized neighborhoods and communities. As co-researchers and authors located across the Global South and North (two of us working in South Africa and the other two in the UK), we draw on our photovoice experiences to discuss the complexities and negotiations inherent in educational participatory projects. By so doing, we contribute to debates surrounding the unfulfilled promises of photovoice projects, whilst acknowledging the fluid spaces it creates for intercultural, more inclusive meaning-making. Our dialectic conversation shows that, despite being fraught with ideological tensions that are amplified by the fundamentally diverse and morally plural world we live and research in, photovoice projects can be worthwhile if we are critically reflexive before, during and long after the research is done.

Introduction

Over the past decade, educational participatory research for transformative change, and studies that support inclusive knowledge production with communities in the global South and elsewhere has been burgeoning (Cooke & Soria-Donlan, 2019; Walker & Boni, 2020; Martinez-Vargas, 2022; Mkwanzani and Cin, 2022; Martinez-Vargas et al. 2024). These studies have tried to draw our attention to amplifying the voices of the communities researchers work with, creating knowledge-generating spaces for a decolonial praxis of epistemic justice, while also providing a critical account of how to collaborate with historically and epistemically decentered communities—not without challenges. Building on this body of work, in this paper, we, as the four authors, located across the Global North (UK) and South (South Africa), are taking a reflective conversational approach to discuss our experiences aligned with the conversational and practice-based ethos of participatory knowledge-sharing. We draw on our work spanning over the last seven years, as co-researchers and co-facilitators of photovoice projects with youth from the global South who live on the margins, including refugee youth, rural youth, and low-income youth. This means that we are acutely aware that: a) Participatory processes that are built on equitable partnership and allyship between local communities researchers have the potential to evoke change and b) Researchers who value the

communities that they work with as ethical subjects of the research and recognise that there is more than one way of meaning making and understanding the world can contribute distinctly to public scholarship (Martinez-Vargas, Walker, Cin and Boni, 2022). However, can these research processes, and photovoice in particular, fulfill their potential given that there will always be complexities that are beyond our control and anticipation? Some of the questions we have asked ourselves when planning photovoice projects are: How should we as researchers collaborate and work with communities on the margins? What are our responsibilities as co-facilitators of this educational research process? How do we create allyship both within and outside the communities we work with? How do we navigate and negotiate the tensions that may emerge at different stages of the research process? How do we manage the research process and disseminate the outcomes collectively with participants without simplifying the plurality of knowledges?

We adopt the African philosophical concept of conversationalism (Chimakonam, 2015) as a dialectical approach to responding to these questions. This approach allows us to create an intellectual space for critical, reflective, and fruitful conversations among ourselves and with others. Chimakonam (2017) defines the concept of conversationalism as an ideology that prioritizes engaging in dialogue with other philosophical traditions and endeavours to construct bridges that facilitate the connection between African, and European epistemological perspectives, thereby highlighting the importance of conversational engagement as a philosophical tradition and emphasizing the need to connect diverse epistemic visions and engage in meaningful dialogue. So, conversationalism aims to bridge different epistemological borders and challenges the notion that a single philosophical tradition can be universally applicable, and is an ideology and methodological path that ‘sees the philosophical space as made up of different traditions which owe one another a moral duty of cross-cultural conversations aimed at realising a just allocation of intellectual spaces’ (Chimakonam, 2017: 122). We do not see conversation here merely as an exchange of opinions, but we see it as a representation of the heterogeneity of expressive capacities – just as we see it in the communities we work with. We are not only addressing the issue of embracing decolonial praxis in educational participatory research and photovoice but also demonstrating how such praxis can extend to academia. Through conversing with each other, we embody the participatory nature of sense making and we challenge commonplace academic writing structures.

Hence, our conversation is organised around four aspects: the onto-epistemological; the axiological; the methodological and temporal dimensions of photovoice projects. The conversations presented in this paper have their genesis in a number of online panels with wider audiences of educational participatory research and online meetings among the four of us. The process of bringing these conversations onto a paper like this also required a series of online meetings and fervent dialogues and discussions of how to present this engagement and get it right. We equally acknowledge that the voices presented in this paper are limited and contained by our own experiences, however, our past and present work has reinforced an intersectional sensibility towards minoritised groups and we have used these experiences to create alliances and power networks to support methodological entanglements between ourselves and members of our own and of others’ communities.

The three photovoice projects

Given the diversity of participatory projects the four of us have collaborated on and coordinated in recent years, this paper focuses on one particular participatory approach common to all of us: photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory research methodology that merges the art of photography and storytelling,

enabling individuals to document their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. This serves as a powerful tool for self-expression and advocacy and promotes critical dialogue and reflection among participants and stakeholders (Wang and Burris, 1997). As a research methodology, photovoice positions participants at the center of research, allowing them to be the subjects of the research. It fosters a sense of agency and participation, encouraging communities to identify solutions to their problems and to craft collective narratives that can drive socio-political change. The process culminates in exhibitions or presentations of the photographs, accompanied by narratives that highlight the key concerns, strengths, and desires of the community (Liebenberg, 2018). These exhibitions serve as a bridge between the communities, different stakeholders (e.g., NGOs), and policymakers, offering a unique and compelling perspective often absent in traditional policymaking processes. Therefore, photovoice in all three projects was in the form of community-based research and advocacy, aiming to facilitate a deeper engagement with the issues at hand, enabling communities to articulate their experiences and aspirations in a manner that resonates with a broad audience. The shared foundation of photovoice across these projects allows us to harmonise our investigative inquiries and reflections, notwithstanding the unique contexts and objectives characterising each project.

The first photovoice example is the 'Access Project' which involved Author 1 (Ca) and Author 4 (Fa). The project was completed in 2018 aimed to understand students' experiences in accessing the South African higher education system through an 'extended programme'. This programme aims to facilitate the entrance of those who otherwise would not enter universities due to low Access Point (AP) scores. After successful completion of the programme, students are then allowed to transition into the mainstream programme. We worked with 11 South African students and employed photovoice to capture narratives of the experience of the extended programme, and the transition into the mainstream programme (Walker, Martinez-Vargas and Mkwananzi, 2020).

The second project involved Author 3 (Me) aimed to foster peacebuilding across three countries: Turkey, South Africa, and Uganda, all of which are among the world's largest hosts of refugees. It sought to initiate dialogues between refugee and host youth in these nations. Working with a total of 38 young individuals, the project employed photovoice as a participatory method, creating a safe space for marginalized groups like refugee youth to engage in epistemic resistance, nurturing their unique expressions and political identities. Amid rising xenophobia in these countries, the participatory approach and exhibition spaces empowered the youth, amplifying their voices and facilitating alliances between marginalised communities and influential actors (Cin, et. Al., 2023). We refer to this example as the 'Peacebuilding Project,' which was completed in 2020.

The third project which we refer to as the 'Freedom Square Project' was carried out in 2022, and aimed to document the pursuit of higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion. Author 2 (Mi) and Author 4 (Fa) worked alongside 12 youth from an upgraded informal settlement known as Freedom Square, near Bloemfontein in the Free State province of South Africa. The youth were introduced to us by a community based organisation and photovoice was used in this project for the youth to explore, reflect on, and creatively express their higher education aspirations, frustrations, opportunities and experiences. The photo essays produced by the youth highlight how higher education access and mobility is shaped by the persistent intersecting effects of Apartheid-era race-based town planning; as well as poverty and inequality (Mkwananzi and Mathebula, 2023).

1) The Onto-epistemological barriers: Why and how do we start a photovoice project?

Ca...: As trained researchers, we think that the first steps in research include drafting a research proposal where we identify an academic gap, or the need for new research, then think about the sample that will be central for the data collection and our methodology, research methods and analysis techniques and so on. However, participatory paradigms (Heron & Reason, 1997) tell us, Wait! Think about the community first! Research is political! As Cronwall and Jewkes (1995) explain, these messages are important because participatory research aims to create the research project with communities, starting with getting to know about community interests, engaging in critical conversation about the challenges that they face, asking about their aspirations and how to bring all these elements together with researchers, and convert them into a feasible project for change whilst embracing diverse worldviews on how knowledge comes about. In some cases, researchers might take on a subordinate role, placing communities at the forefront participatory research processes (Duraiapaah, Rody & Parry, 2005). In academic circles, this example is the exception, if ever possible, because we have to deal with many tensions between academia and the logics under which universities operate, such that the ways in which we would like to initiate and conceptualise our participatory projects is compromised. This was the case with our Access Project. Our photovoice research was conceptualized as part of a larger project, with a particular view about the role of higher education institutions able to facilitate access for certain collectives that have been historically penalised and constrained of their educational opportunities due to their permanent victimisation of structural circumstances out of their power. Also, there was an assumption that access to higher education was intrinsically important for these communities, and somehow we know it is, however, it is unclear if this is a means to achieve economic freedom in a country with extreme inequalities or a will to increase other important freedoms in their lives (perhaps both). In any case, our diagnostic came from a literature review, and we situated ourselves in a particular discourse about what higher education could contribute in such contexts, without necessarily asking students what was important for them to investigate or what would be of value for them. This is not to say the research object of study was not significant, of course it was, and we cannot either romanticize students' preferences, however, we can confirm the space for negotiation and discussion was not in the research focus. Conscious of this limitation, which has equally happened in later projects, we decided to modify what is often the operationalisation of photovoice in a more technocratic manner into a more narrative approach. In this space of generation of meaning students would have more freedom to build and develop a personal narrative instead of just identifying key elements and factors. Equally, building the story students could create and re-create meanings about who they are and how they see themselves in the world, which is specially relevant for us not to 'represent' the other as external but rather from their own construction of lived experiences and self-identification.

We see then, the need to negotiate, navigate and transgress to the level that is available to us in our diverse contexts and circumstances, drawing to the extent that is feasible but also more aligned with those participatory logics that we could and have good reasons to preserve and promote, despite structural difficulties and challenges.

That is why, I emphasise the centrality to reflect about our initial steps, the initial decision-making process and the photovoice project launch as a way to reflect about what it means to generate knowledge, and then deal with the complexities, political negotiations and compromises that we have to make despite our participatory aspirations. That is why our first reflection ought to start by answering questions such as, Which knowledge project is important? For whom? And why? Who decides who participates? And why?

How can we, if so, transgress some of our institutional assumptions about initiating research? Can we engage with communities before thinking about and conceptualising the photovoice project? Do we even need a photovoice project at all?

Me...: I find the questions Ca... poses central to the idea of why and how participatory research should be our central concern particularly when working with marginalised communities. I see participatory action research as central to knowledge-making and knowledge-conveying practices. Similar to our approach in this paper, engaging in deep discussions of the episteme of a particular issue is a decolonial and emancipatory praxis. It is a decolonial and emancipatory praxis and a process of creating inclusive ecology and plurality of knowledges if we adhere to the participatory ethos.

The questions C... ask should be the starting point of participatory ethos. A key issue widely discussed at this level is that many researchers working transnationally across borders with multiple partners, often conceptualise and plan the participatory project without consulting the communities they hope to work with (see also Mkwanzani & Cin, 2021). The marginal bodies they aim to engage with are seldom included in the agenda setting and rarely do they have the power of claiming ownership and space of the project. This is simply ignoring indigenous/local ways of knowing - including the awareness that creating knowledge is relational - that exist across the globe. Such projects do not only lead to being less sustainable, but also lead to waste of time, resource and energy as they are not addressing the immediate concerns of the community; not to mention the reinforcement of colonial approaches to research. The participatory element should start right from the beginning with a conversation with the communities rather than pre-defining the agenda. For example, in the 'Peacebuilding project', the aim was loosely defined in terms of disrupting exclusionary discourses about refugees. However, the participants claimed this space of production at an early phase in the process of our co-design of research workshops by actively engaging in the themes to be covered and the stakeholders to be invited to the event. They expressed their discontentment about telling their stories of how they had been discriminated and exposed to xenophobia, and instead suggested taking the photographs that signified peace, hope and reconciliation between two communities. We need such engagements and researchers to open the epistemic space and leave the participants to shape the agenda of the type and content of work needed for them. This does not imply that researchers should simply walk into any community and start working with them. Prior engagement and trust-building activities are crucial. In this project, we engaged in six months of activities with the community through a local NGO that had been working with them. This allowed us to establish a presence and build trust within the community before initiating our research work. I think the problem is that researchers rush into communities with great expectations of doing something participatory. First, we need to respond to the questions of "Who owns the projects? Who sets the goal and agendas? Who leads the way?" "This was certainly the series of questions we aimed to address in our project. We conducted multiple engagement workshops to give participants ownership of the process, allowing them to set their agendas within the project and creating safe spaces where they feel belonging. Here, the long term engagement with the communities, building trust and spending ample amount of time to get to know each other are key.

Fa...: Picking up on Ca...'s assertion that research is political – indeed, and while some researchers have long hesitated to acknowledge the fact that science is political as Sabbagh (2017) notes, our acknowledgment of 'research as politics' pushes the boundary of a tradition that has often seen research as the golden standard of objectivity, synonymised it with words like 'unbiased' and 'rational', divorcing it from human subjectivity and societal unpredictability (Sabbagh, 2017). Yet, research occurs in a complex

web of existence and interaction, including climate change, class inequalities, human mobility, economic instabilities and so on. Traditionally, the norm has often been to follow an ‘orderly process’ in conducting research without reflecting on the messiness and complexity of these processes. However, academic researchers have slowly challenged these traditional approaches to thinking about and doing research over time. It is important to acknowledge that such reflexivity has resulted from realising that knowledge creation does not remain static but continues to evolve, just as we do. The important thing to note is that in a participatory onto-epistemology, academic research is not contradictory to or independent from practitioner interventions. This stems from the notion that the increasing complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of the world and its pressing social, environmental, economic, political, and climate challenges, make it paramount that academic research is deliberately merged with practitioner interventions to address these challenges. However, as Me... cautions above, it is not only an epistemic injustice to simply ignore indigenous and local ways of knowing that exist, but such practices lead to epistemic negligence where knowledge possessed by ‘the other’ is overlooked/ignored resulting in (un) intended harm.

Therefore, part of the response to navigating, and sometimes addressing this changing landscape of knowledge production requires identifying synergies between and across practices and disciplines previously considered contradictory in approach. For instance, research approaches in academia and research practices in industry are often driven by international development. The partnerships between universities and community organisations, and sometimes international non-governmental organisations, have been long overdue, and it is refreshing to experience a move of these two seemingly diverse ‘entities’ gaining traction. The call for drawing on ‘synergies’ and ‘shared knowledge(s)’ is seen in the increasing emphasis on research partnerships between academics and development practitioners, often supported by initiatives such as the UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), from which some of our projects have benefited.

As most of our ‘academic’ projects have been funded, it is important for us as researchers to understand that funding initiatives are set and driven by particular ‘ideological assumptions and agendas,’ including those around ‘international development’ (Fransman and Newman, 2019: 524). Yet, despite this, the process of participatory approaches still allows us to, within these set ‘particular ideologies’ tap into broader contemporary discourses around impact. These non-academic benefits of research often call for epistemic contributions through engaging practices with the communities, thus, bringing the politics of research and funding into conversation with each other. This practical dimension of research projects ought to be seen as a necessary basis for thinking beyond the empirical or theoretical and acting toward much-desired change in society.

2) The Axiological dimension: What are the photovoice ethos?

Ca...: With photovoice ethos we refer to the researchers’ acts and relationalities between the research process and the research team. It also relates to the values and value judgment involved in the ethical considerations. Although some ideas have been explored in the section above, here I reflect more on the instrumentalisation of humans for the sake of scientific research or market outcomes, bringing onto question our individual ethical and moral guidelines and how these relate to those of the communities we work with, which requires constant negotiation for alignment, consistency and coherence between our ambitions and theirs. In this aspect we can say that the main objective of participatory research is to enhance human

flourishing. But the challenge again lies in establishing coherence; between moral our predispositions and our praxis as researchers and flawed human beings. For instance, this was a substantial aspect of the Access project, a participatory research with undergraduate students in one South African university, bringing engaged students in conversations with other organisations on campus but also understanding university students as autonomous and responsible agents in the change they wish to prompt in their universities as ethical actors shaping their praxis (Martinez-Vargas et. al 2024). This ethos transcends the aim of knowledge for the generation of knowledge as this is intrinsically linked to and politicised the individuals and groups that carry them. In this case, we see groups and communities as both ends and means; their extended epistemologies see knowledge rooted in their everyday experiences and also consummated in practice (Heron and Reason, 1997). They are not just instruments to achieve our research agendas. It is up to us to align what we believe is just with the opportunities we have to do research differently. Certainly, this is a complex and multidimensional matter given that our cultural realities are much more complex when working in academic spaces and developing our careers at the same time as we use educational participatory research. That is why, a process such as the X becomes essentially a constant negotiation of how we can displace instrumental ethos internalized within ourselves and others to a more critical co-operative relations in which we become social and political allies of local communities when opportunities for flourishing are negated and challenged.

Fa...: Indeed, C..., the participatory practice of bringing groups of people into conversation drawing on their diverse and unique knowledges and experiences is an ethos that should underlie any efforts that seek to advance knowledge creation. An ethos that values diversity, conversational thinking, open engagement, openness to learning, and transforming the status quo. In its nature, such an ethos problematises the instrumentalisation of people and groups who participate in the projects that we do in such a way that minimises the misrepresentations that have been suffered by those living on the margins of epistemic lines as illustrated by all three projects mentioned in this paper. Specific to our Freedom Square project, which build-on to earlier work done by scholars such as Marais and Krige (1997) and Sinxadi (2020) who documented not only high levels of poverty in the area but also youth on epistemic lines based on the socio-spatial exclusion. High levels of poverty, low literacy levels, limited access to justice and health facilities, a high rate of alcohol-related violence, and a lack of secure employment opportunities (Marais & Krige, 1997; Sinxadi, 2020) as social structures put youth at a disadvantage of 'exclusion'. I share the same view with Kosko, Dastin, Merrill and Sheth (2022) that the problem with such structural weakness, is that it limits youths' opportunity to exercise their rights to participate in processes of social change that affect them, to be heard and understood, to be accepted as authentic knowers, and to share in the co-creation of political awareness and social knowledge. In a similar participatory project with rural youth in Zimbabwe that I was part of, we found that youth experiences of systematic exclusion, that is excluding them from everyday development matters risks societies having a youth population that is 'invisible' in political, economic, and social development spaces elsewhere (Marovah & Mkwanzanji, 2020). Yet, just like other constituents of the population, youth can be agents in bringing about desired change.

While the overall aim of the Freedom Square project was to explore youths' educational trajectories and, through photovoice, document how youth participate in higher education, the project was also interested in ways in which photovoice, beyond expanding epistemic space for youth, could capture the contextual detail on Freedom Square, and acutely illustrate how persistent socioeconomic and urban inequality, individual choice, and geography intersect to constrain aspirations for youth in an informal settlement. Although not without challenges, engaging with the audiences through an exhibition at the local university

and an open public engagement event in the city, using photovoice, and collaborating with the youth, and local NGO were not only necessary to disrupt colonial approaches to knowledge creation but also necessary in understanding the multiple realities of the community without falling in the trap of perpetuating unexamined assumptions about contexts we know little about. Photovoice, therefore, as an open engagement tool, reconciles the past instrumentalisation of youth (as subjects of research) by placing them at the forefront of crafting their narratives and allowing them to reflect on their lived realities (Zurba, Tennent and Woodgate, 2017; Courcy and Koniou, 2022) to raise awareness and understanding of the uniqueness of experiences in sites like Freedom square. This is exactly what Me... argues above in relation to participatory projects being central to both, knowledge-making, and knowledge-conveying practices.

3) The Methodological dimension: What are the tensions, complexities, and conflicts that arise in the photovoice process?

Mi...: Tensions can arise due to various factors and at different phases; they may come about early in the process when trying to establish a productive relationship to work with community-based organisations, or later when there are disagreements about workshop activities. This was the case in our Freedom Square project that explored the dynamics of pursuing higher education in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion. As mentioned earlier, the project involved 12 youth from an upgraded informal settlement in 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 procedure (which is very similar in all three projects that we discuss in this paper) involved an introductory workshop, individual interviews, a series of photovoice workshops, group discussions, and a public exhibition. During the photovoice workshops the youth were trained to document through photographs their past experiences, present opportunities, and aspirations for their futures. 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 their autonomy and disrupting the storytelling process. This ultimately led to a breakdown in the relationship formed with the community-based organisation, which brings into question the purposes (and limitations) of gatekeepers. We changed venues for the remaining workshop, and the exhibition to create some distance from the community-based organization. But this affected who could attend the public exhibition. This is just one way that tensions in a photovoice project can arise, which is complicated by the presence of community gatekeepers. One way to address this tension is to have in-depth discussions with all stakeholders about the importance of developing narrative capabilities and enhancing epistemic contributions through photovoice (Walker & Mathebula, 2020) before the research is undertaken. So despite McFadyen's (2016) assertion that gatekeepers play a key role in facilitating researchers' access to potential participants and research sites, they can also be the source of tensions and disruptions to the research process, due to shifting power imbalances between differently located stakeholders. And although photovoice (which combine elements of co-production, and valuing of diverse experiences and expertise) is generally designed to remedy power asymmetries, it can fail to do so if it is implemented naively.

To achieve the potential that photovoice projects have, careful and mutually respectful partnerships between community-based organisations, community members and university-based researchers must be fostered. And at least one facilitator needs to be well trained and prepared to mitigate tensions.

Me...: Indeed, tensions and conflicts can arise within the participatory research process, including issues related to project ownership and setting the research agenda, but they may also emerge from partnerships within the research project. While NGOs and humanitarian workers typically aim to work in the best interests of the communities they serve, they may face pressure in politically fragile and authoritarian contexts to depoliticise their work in order to avoid repercussions from the government or state authorities. They may also subtly align their work with the political narrative and agenda of the ruling authority. We have experienced this when working with refugee youth in Uganda where the spaces created for participants to engage publicly were inherently politically charged. Consequently, there was pushback and resistance from NGOs and local actors. The narratives presented with the intention of initiating change provoked counter-resistance, with humanitarian and local NGOs viewing them as concerns or threats. These challenges were intertwined with larger political conflicts concerning good governance on a broader scale. Hence, it is crucial to recognise that complexities can also arise when vested interests come into question.

Fa... Building on the tensions you highlight, Me..., it is crucial for us as academic researchers to acknowledge the need to balance our responsibility as research facilitators and as co-producers of knowledge. There are two points that can be raised here. The first is that we wear two hats: that of facilitators, who are responsible for driving the research process, as per the obligation we have to other stakeholders who are part of our projects, such as the academic institutions we come from and the funders of these projects. We facilitate a process with communities who, ideally, should be able to benefit from the processes we employ, whether the benefit is instrumental or instrumentally valued by them. Secondly, we are knowledge producers by virtue of the fact that academic scholarship should be advanced by the processes, findings, and analyses we make of the circumstances and lived realities of people. Therefore, we have an obligation to two entities, the structures that support the research and the communities that participate in the research; both of whom contribute to the process of knowledge production. Our responsibility, therefore, is to play a balancing act between research as a process and the desired impact, which Werker & Hopp (2020) found not to be impossible.

Furthermore, this kind of participatory work requires that we are continuously self-critical through the process of reflexivity. Through this process, as Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) suggests, we can question how knowledge is generated and how power relations influence the process of knowledge production, thereby being aware of the potential of academic colonialism and finding ways to circumvent it such that it does not infringe on communities' needs. In our acknowledgment that co-creation requires relegating power to those with less power, we are cautious of the entanglement of power and knowledge in the research process. **As Mi...highlights above**, in our Freedom Square project the youth had the power to decide and engage with us as facilitators on what is valuable to them. Reflecting on the process, two things come to light, and both require balanced views and opinions: (i) had we done all things right, there may have been nothing new to learn about the process of knowledge production. Yet, it is the new things that we learn every day from our collaborators that make the process of knowledge creation, a process to look forward to. Letting go of old habits and assumptions, in our methodological approaches, including the assumption that the methods we choose will interest others as much as they interest us. (ii) Had we done all things wrong, with no room for engagement, no open platform for listening, we may not have created any lasting

relationships with the youth. Possibly, their narratives may have been different – with the youth skeptical to open about their real experiences especially based on the stigma attached to their neighbourhood.

We, therefore, are required to critically reflect on the multiple interrelations between power and knowledge in the research process. Without relegating power to those without power, participatory approaches such as photovoice then risk remain exclusionary and contradictory to the democratic and participatory nature of alternative research approaches. In our project, negotiating the power balance resulted in youth self-reflecting on who they are, their role in society, how they want to be identified, and the future of this identity. My continuous project reflections lead me to conclude that doing this kind of work requires not only a shift in the research status quo or creativity, but specific researcher qualities such as openness to finding alternative strategies to what does not work (in specific contexts), and questioning one's own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and actions.

4) The temporal and factual dimension: What is next and when does the educational project get completed? Whose responsibility is it to enable or ensure?

Mi....: In some photovoice projects, like the one Me... referred to earlier, it is possible for a solution to be engineered by a partnering NGO. In other projects, the end point is not as clear. Our project with the youth from Freedom Square is a good example. Despite the evidence produced, and recommendations made, we could not engineer solutions for the youth to access higher education and benefit from it; because accessing higher education is affected by both individual and structural dynamics. The photo essays produced by the youth, and the literature we reviewed for this project tell us that higher education access and mobility in South Africa is shaped not only by individual choice and agency, but also by the persistent intersecting effects of Apartheid-era race-based spatial planning; as well as poverty and inequality (Walker et al. 2022)

Therefore, all of our dissemination strategies at the 'end' of the photovoice project like the public exhibition, the project report, public engagement pieces etc. can only do so much. And our recommendations to universities, as feasible as some of them might be, cannot lead to change if they are not taken forward.

While the project created an environment for youth to express themselves and share their realities, it has also been a stark reminder that most challenges do not have immediate solutions, even when interventions are well thought through and implemented in fully participatory ways. And perhaps many photovoice projects never really come to a complete end because the problems they seek to address are structural, pervasive, ongoing and everchanging. While some projects will have a clear end, where facilitators, co-researchers, and partnering NGOs walk away knowing that the best outcome they could have hoped for was achieved. In other projects, we need to acknowledge that the research process may conclude, even if we feel unsettled about the outcome or if there has been minimal or no noticeable change. That said, it is also important to acknowledge the different ways in which the research participants (and facilitators) are changed by the process of research e.g. through the expansion of narrative capabilities (Mathebula & Martinez-Vargas, 2021; Walker and Mathebula, 2020); even if these changes are less 'measurable' or tangible due to their incremental nature. This leads me to think that a less ambitious, but still hopeful and more achievable aim for participatory inquiry is to nudge or shift people's mindsets and/or broaden perspectives. These are some of the less measurable impacts of photovoice, which over a much longer period of time beyond the project, make social change more likely in the long run.

Me...: So what and what happens next is a key question that speaks to the sustainability of the participatory research we are doing. How can we, and should we be, in touch with the communities we worked with and continue supporting them even if the funding is not there for future activities. The key question is to design sustainable projects that could continue after the funded lifetime of the project. This is relatively easier when working with enthusiastic communities and grassroots organisations that could carry the momentum of the change forward. As I have highlighted at the onset the conversation ensuring sustainability lies in the center of co-designing the projects with the communities we work with to envisage the process in a way that it continues to support their livelihoods, cause or public engagement. For example, in our project, three refugee youth pursued photography as a professional career after receiving training in creative industry skills through the project. They furthered their training using the small funds they secured from local NGOs. The project generated critical awareness and advocacy for refugees among the local participants particularly in Istanbul site, long term friendships were formed, some of the youth are still in touch but most importantly it started a process of listening to each other, and creating critical publicity where counter-narratives are expressed. It also facilitated intergenerational connections and the transfer of skills, values, and knowledge that the older members of the communities had previously discouraged. This shift aimed to encourage the youth to remain in their communities rather than migrating to cities in search of a better life.

The question, ‘How is this project going to end?’ is something that should be embedded across the participatory research and include strategic planning. One moral responsibility we bear as co-researchers working with communities is to avoid leaving them in a state of agony and desperation after the research process. It is essential to consider post-dissemination strategies carefully to prevent communities from feeling a sense of hopelessness when they realize their ability to instigate transformative change in the long run is limited. Our ethical accountabilities lie in co-designing sustainable and transformative participatory projects that prioritise the knowledge and voices of the communities without causing unnecessary disappointment. One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to cut ties with communities after collaborating with them, not going back and neglecting to build upon the foundations laid. We consistently return to these communities in subsequent projects or engagements to critically reflect on what we initiated.

Ca...: Thank you Mi... and Me... for highlighting such critical matters. Especially when talking about participatory research or Action Research, the impact component is quite crucial. Participatory research expands the role of researchers and co-researchers as active agents of change. It makes us rethink what it takes and what it means to be a ‘researcher’. I would say that this is a tension between what we are supposed to do in academia (produce knowledge) and what we aspire to achieve through research (human flourishing). Perhaps one question is to ask ourselves which kind of researcher do we want to be? And which kind of researcher should we be? Certainly, from both of your pieces we can say that long-term engagement with communities and sustainable change are essential not only to create trust and operationalise our project in more ethically aligned ways, but substantial to create long term and sustainable relations at different levels with different actors and stakeholders part of the structural problem under research. This is well articulated by Me..., highlighting the importance of sustainability. However, two important questions come out of these reflections. First, where do we draw the end line if there is any? Is this line an action line, a factual line or a knowledge line? For instance, in the case mentioned by Mi... the generation of the charter, beyond any other factual change. And secondly, do we need to consider epistemic explorations as a consequence of creating sustainable change as Me... was referring? Is our expectation that communities continue after the project without economic and financial support when they are most of the time individuals with limited resources/opportunities in one or another way? And both aspects intersect

in one of my major concern about this issue. Are we epistemically exploiting communities during and beyond the project but also sustaining structures of epistemic and neoliberal exploitation? I believe Berenstain (2016) captures really well this concern, exploring how privileged groups force marginalised communities to educate them about the nature of their oppressions and how this becomes an unpaid nature of educational labour. As she (2016) confirms ‘it masquerades as a necessary and even epistemically virtuous form of intellectual engagement, and it is often treated as an indispensable method of attaining knowledge’ but for me this not only occurs at the knowledge level but the action level. Who ought to be the one changing and doing something to change structures of oppression? Are communities responsible to continue after the project with no financial and economic support to do so from our part?

Conclusion

Although we may provide more questions than responses, this conversationalist approach (Chimokonam, 2015) does not aim to land in final answers to our complex questions but rather to commence a critical reflection among ourselves and others interested in participatory research as a space of incoherences, complexities and negotiations. Any participatory process needs to go in both ways internally, as exploring the embodied oppression we carry with us as researchers—somehow privileged—but also constrained by our institutions and neoliberal logics of what a researcher ought to do and aspire to do. And secondly, considering the external context and the interaction between who we are, what we believe is fair and just and those of the context and communities we work with to generate sustainable social change. Approaching this aspect as fostering epistemic humility seems somehow in the right direction, at least theoretically (Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2022). Acknowledging the aspects we may not fully grasp from the communities' cosmovision and ways of living, we also question our mistakes, limitations, and inconsistencies in our actions and research. However, the key challenge lies in navigating the implications of this understanding in our practical application within fluid spaces of intercultural meaning-making and ideological tensions, within a fundamentally diverse and morally plural world.

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