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ARTICLES :

SWIMMING UPSTREAM: NAVIGATING ETHICAL PRACTICES IN THE CREATION OF A PARTICIPATORY YOUTH MEDIA WORKSHOP

MYRA MARGOLIN
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, CHAMPAIGN–URBANA

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing popularity of participatory video as a tool for facilitating youth empowerment, the methodology and impacts of the practice are extremely understudied. This paper describes a study design created to examine youth media methodology and the ethical dilemmas that arose in its attempted implementation. Specifically, elements that added "rigor" to the study (i.e., randomization, pre- and post-measures, and an intensive interview) conflicted with the fundamental tenets of youth participation. The paper concludes with suggestions for studying participatory media methodologies that are more in line with an ethics of participation[1].

RÉSUMÉ

Malgré la popularité croissante de la production vidéo participative en tant qu'outil pour favoriser la prise de pouvoir chez les jeunes, la méthodologie et les impacts de cette pratique demeurent largement inexplorés. Le présent article décrit le design d'une étude conçue pour examiner la méthodologie de la création vidéo chez des jeunes ainsi que les dilemmes éthiques soulevés lors de la tentative de son application. Concrètement, des éléments apportant de la « rigueur » à l'étude (i.e. l'échantillonnage aléatoire, la prise de mesures avant et après l'opération et la réalisation d'une entrevue intensive) sont rentrés en conflit avec les principes de la participation des jeunes. L'article conclut avec des propositions méthodologiques pour l'étude des média participatifs qui seraient plus cohérents avec une éthique de la participation.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of using video as a participatory tool to empower young people and bring their voices into social and civic dialogues is exploding[1]. Nevertheless, the methodology for carrying out such a practice is extremely understudied. This paper focuses on the design of a study meant to examine youth media methodology and the ethical tensions that arose in its attempted implementation. Specifically, ethical dilemmas surfaced in the navigation of the project's dual foci as both a participatory video endeavor and a scholar-driven research undertaking.

As a participatory video project, my goal was for young women to create videos to explore their personal lives, their communities and/or the institutional systems with which they had regular contact. As a research project, my aim was to study the methodology of participatory youth media production and the differential impacts of varying methodological choices. In the process of designing the workshop, I found the philosophies underlying these two components to frequently be in conflict. Specifically, elements that increased the "rigor" of the research component were often contradictory to the participatory, youth-driven philosophy underlying the video component.

This paper explores how these ethical tensions were navigated and discusses the implications for the systematic study of participatory video methodology.

PARTICIPATORY VIDEO, YOUTH MEDIA, AND THE NEED FOR RESEARCH ON METHODOLOGY

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY VIDEO?

Participatory video is a practice that evolved in the 1960s in the contexts of development communications[2], the community and grassroots media movements[3] and visual anthropology[4]. While there is no universally agreed upon definition of participatory video[5], what is essential to the practice is that "ordinary people" are meaningfully involved in the production of videos that in some way represent their own voices. Generally participatory video carries with it, either implicitly or explicitly, some sort of social change rhetoric or agenda[6]. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the term "youth media" to connote a sub-practice of participatory video that focuses on the creation of media with young people[7].

The practice of participatory video has remained suspended in the realm of experimentation for the past four decades. Unlike photography, which has been developed into an increasingly common participatory research tool known as photovoice[8], participatory video has failed to evolve into a single practice or multiple distinct practices[9]. Rather it is often used inconsistently and without clearly articulated goals[10]. Additionally, it lacks a strong theoretical literature, which could help to guide methodological decisions. Media educator Kathleen Tyner characterized youth media as "saddled with a confusing theory base and implementation strategy" due to the paucity of research on the "impact of youth media programs"[11].

Much of the existing research on youth media and participatory video consists of single case studies[12]. These tend to be anecdotal rather oriented towards building theory or systematically developing methodological frameworks. A trend in this literature is for authors to report starting from scratch, reinventing the wheel in terms of their methodological approach, rather than drawing on pre-existing literature. As a result, many of these studies present very general, initial findings that do not provide deep insights into specific methodological questions.

There is a desire for more systematic assessments of the impacts of the practice[13].

A recent study conducted with youth media practitioners reported a "general consensus" in the call for the collection of "good data about participants and their backgrounds to build a baseline" as well as "pre- and post-testing embedded in the program to measure change over time"[14]. A central challenge, therefore, in the development of youth media and participatory video practice is to start to link methodological processes with theory, goals and desired outcomes through systematic investigation.

THE NEED FOR SYSTEMATIC STUDY: LOCATING MYSELF

Before describing my research design and its accompanying ethical dilemmas, I should make two notes regarding the location from which I approached this endeavor. First, I came to youth media with a background in filmmaking and worked in the field for several years before entering graduate school. My experiences mirrored those reported by other practitioners[15]: questions involving effective methodology continually arose and I remained unsure as to how to create programs that would live up to the rampant claims that youth media "empowered" young people and created social change[16]. None of the publications I found helped me answer questions such as whether it was appropriate that I often ended up doing much of the editing or how much time I should spend teaching the technical details of camera work and shot composition[17]. It was this perceived knowledge gap and my personal frustrations that motivated me to go to graduate school. I entered with the explicit intent to investigate methodological issues in youth media and participatory video practice.

Second, this study was designed as a final paper for a mandatory research methods course I took in my first-year of graduate school (the study was carried out in the same year). This course, although it touched on qualitative and participatory research, used Shadish, Cook & Campbell's *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference* as a central text[18]. Therefore, the study design was more informed by positivist standards of rigor than it might have otherwise been.

HOW TO STUDY METHODOLOGY?

Scholars are just beginning to explore ways to explicitly examine the impacts of visual participatory processes. Foster-Fishman et al. conducted an exploratory study of the individual-level impacts of a photovoice project[19]. They conducted semi-structured interviews with several participants three months after the end of the project. From this data, they concluded that the photovoice process appeared to have been empowering. Nonetheless, the authors reported several limitations, including the limited explanatory power of loosely structured post-assessments as a primary data source.

Ethnographies that enable researchers to compare two or more groups in similar contexts provide considerable leverage for drawing causal pathways while retaining the rich detail of a case study. For instance, in a comparative ethnography of three high school video classes, Beaty proposed criteria for the evaluation of youth agency based on editing, scripting, and camera work. Applying theory and systematic study, she found that many of the assignments in the video classes actually "worked in opposition to the development of self-expression via video"[20]. Mitra compared two school-based youth participation efforts and identified approaches by adult facilitators that varied in their effectiveness in fostering true youth participation[21]. These studies both achieved a level of specificity regarding methodology and its impacts that is generally absent from the youth media and participatory video literatures.

Merging the case study with a comparative ethnography results in a form of quasi-experiment[22]. A quasi-experimental participatory video study would create two or more groups with the explicit intent of comparing methodological approaches. Hypotheses about methodology would be embedded in the project design. For example, two workshops could be designed with controlled elements (e.g., meeting time, meeting place, size of group) and elements of interest could be varied (e.g., amount of time spent on technical training versus on content development). This is the approach I took in the study design discussed below. Many of the ethical dilemmas that arose stemmed from my attempt to create a project that was simultaneously a "quasi-experimental" comparative study and a participatory youth media endeavor.

THE CURRENT STUDY

NARRATIVE AS A CONSTRUCT OF INTEREST

Although there is pervasive rhetoric surrounding the ability of participatory video to represent the "authentic voices" of marginalized young people, it is rarely acknowledged that any "voice" that emerges

through the video process is mediated by multiple factors. Among these is an organization or facilitator's particular methodological approach, which will inevitably shape the structure, presentation and focus of the stories that are told. When the constructed nature of narrative is acknowledged, a justification can be made for centering it as a key construct of interest in participatory video practice.

Rappaport, writing about communal narratives as community resources, highlighted the interconnectedness of an individual's personal story with his/her broader context, noting the "mutual influence process between…community, organizational, and personal stories"[23]. This interconnectedness is foundational to McAdams's life story model of identity. With this model, McAdams proposed that "identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme…Life stories are psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning. As such, individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race, and class."[24] Due to the constructed nature of identity presented by this model, it may be possible to uncover detrimental, internalized narratives that stem from dominant, oppressive cultural norms and "restory" these in a way that leads to positive identity development[25].

Given the disempowering ways that young people, particularly youth from marginalized communities, are constructed in the mass media, through social science research and in educational and social service policy and practice[26], there is much potential for youth empowerment in the creation of alternate narratives that challenge these dominant constructions[27]. Two central approaches amongst youth media practitioners represent two distinct theories regarding youth empowerment. The first focuses on the personal stories of individual young people. This strengths-based approach rests on validating and respecting youth as full human beings with significant life experiences to share. In this case, dominant narratives are challenged by giving space to the rich individuality and complexity of personal stories. The second approach is oriented toward the creation of youth-produced videos that investigate social issues relevant to the young people themselves and does not primarily focus on personal stories. This model mirrors Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil's work on sociopolitical development[28] and is evident in the emphasis placed on media literacy in Steven Goodman's book *Teaching Youth Media*[29]. Central to this approach is Paolo Freire's work on critical consciousness and the belief that a deeper awareness of oppressive social systems can impact the way one interprets and stories the events of one's life. Ross broadly characterized the differentiation between these two approaches as "arts versus activism"[30].

While narrative permeates multiple levels of analysis, its role in participatory video has not been sufficiently explored. As it is easiest to begin a preliminary investigation at the individual level, I chose to examine the question of how a youth media project could impact the way that identity is storied. Specifically, I was interested in: a) whether the intentional structuring of a narrative of personal relevance would impact the storying of identity; and b) whether a focus on a personal story or a social issue would differentially impact the nature of this re-storying.

CONTEXT

The current study was designed as a component of a larger project for teenage girls with recent involvement in the juvenile justice system. The overarching goal was to respond to the general neglect of girls with system involvement since much of the research and interventions for system-involved youth has been oriented towards boys[31]. The project took place in a moderately sized midwestern town that has sizable white and African American communities. For the most part, the participants in the project were young women of color from poor, working poor and working class backgrounds.

STUDY DESIGN

According to the study design, two groups of 4-6 teens each would meet once a week. I would facilitate both groups to "control" for facilitator influence. They would meet for the same amount of time

and the general structure of the workshops would be the same. The manipulated variables would be the exercises and processes by which narratives were developed. One group would focus on stories of a personal nature (e.g., an autobiography, a period of change in my life, something I am proud of) while the other would focus on topics meant to foster sociopolitical development (e.g., examinations of issues involving the local educational or juvenile justice systems). To increase "rigor", participants would be randomly assigned to a group (based on which day they chose to participate) and would not be informed of the differences between the groups at the outset.

Multiple measures would be employed to address the impact of the workshops. First, each teen would go through a life story interview[32] as a pre-measure in order to gauge how they "storied" their lives before the creation of the media. According to the life story interview protocol, interviewees are asked, among other things, to identify key life events as well as high and low points. Each participant would also create a lifeline drawing, a timeline of one's life. Lifeline drawings have been used as powerful pre- and post-measures in the examination of an intervention's impact[33]. An abbreviated version of the interview and the creation of another lifeline drawing would comprise the post-measure. Second, I would take ethnographic field notes throughout the process. Third, each teen would take reflective notes at the end of each session and then share what she chose with me at the end of the project. Fourth, the media that we generated, both raw footage and completed projects, would be included in the analysis.

RESULTS

THE DISMANTLING OF THE STUDY DESIGN

Like the petals of a flower in the fall that drop off one by one, so did each element of my carefully constructed quasi-experiment fall off until I was left with no semblance of the original design. While there were definite logistical factors that contributed to this dismantling, the instigation of the undoing was a series of ethical quandaries that arose as the requirements for methodological rigor butted up against the philosophy of youth participation.

ETHICAL DILEMMA #1: RANDOMIZATION

The first major casualty was randomization. I had rationalized that young people who participate in any youth media project are subject to the methodological decisions of that project's facilitator(s). I reasoned that it was only by chance that I was offering two groups with two different foci and that assignment in either one would be like participating in a typical youth media project. Despite my justifications, what I can only describe as "a bad feeling" haunted me until I decided to drop the randomization and allow the teens to pick a content orientation.

This "bad feeling," upon closer examination, stemmed from a fundamental conflict with the very foundations of youth participation. The argument for youth participation rests on challenging the construction of young people as incompetent, passive, and not deserving of a voice in the decisions that impact their lives[34]. A key tenet of youth participation, then, is re-envisioning young people as competent social actors.

While group assignment did not represent a major decision, the symbolic message of random assignment would have communicated that the commitment to teen agency was limited or conditional. It would have required a degree of deception on my part if the assignment was truly to be random. It also did not honor the individual strengths, proclivities or inclinations of the youth involved. Even if the rest of the production process had centered on promoting youth agency and competency, random assignment was in essence the denial of such agency and choice.

The decision of whether or not to implement random assignment was fundamentally an ethical one, asking: should youth participation be selective or pervasive? If one is committed to involving young people, can one also engage in the small deception of random assignment? I concluded that to subscribe to the notion of young people as competent social actors who are systematically denied a voice in deci-

sion-making and then to strip them of the decision between the two orientations of the workshops was fundamentally unethical.

ETHICAL DILEMMA #2: THE PRE-MEASURE

The next petal to drop was the pre-measure. I juggled several options in my head, hoping one would make me feel comfortable. Should I interview each teen? Should I have them interview each other? Perhaps I could have a fellow graduate student who was not otherwise involved interview them. Again, the abandonment of the pre-interview was precipitated by the same "bad feeling" that arrived long before I was able to articulate exactly why I could not go through with that portion of the research design. Again, on closer inspection, the root of this feeling was located in the inherent ethical violation of the tenets of youth participation.

With the implementation of a pre-measure, the role of research subject would have been the first role expectation presented to the teens. According to Bronfenbrenner, "placing people in different roles, even in the same setting, can radically influence the kinds of activities and relations in which they engage"[35]. Meaningful participation is not an expectation amongst youth who have been systematically excluded and alienated in institutional contexts[36]. Young people, particularly youth of color and poor and working-class youth, are often silenced as a function of the role expectations embedded within educational settings[37]. In such settings, adults, by design, hold more power than youth[38]. The expectations of youth invisibility, silence and powerlessness are mirrored and often heightened in the context of the juvenile justice system. The traditional roles of researcher/research subject replicate the adult/youth power relations implicit in the role expectations of educational and juvenile justice settings.

A goal of participatory processes is to reorient power away from the researcher/facilitator to a situation of shared power. This requires not only the existence of empowering settings[39], but an intentional depowering on the part of the researcher/facilitator. Depowerment refers to the acknowledgement of one's own position of power and an intentional relinquishing of some of the privileges that accompany that power[40]. Cahill, Sultana, & Pain framed this as an ethical "commitment to addressing the differential power imbalances and privileges between (participatory) researchers"[41]. I was acutely aware that, as a white, upper middle class, university-affiliated adult, my identity carried with it implications about privilege and power that required me to pay particular attention to the roles I was responsible for creating for myself and the teens.

The initial insertion of the teens into the role of research participant - even if it was temporary, even if it was respectful, and even, as an advisor of mine argued, if the interview was a potentially enjoyable and beneficial process that provided a reflective space for the teens to express themselves – this ultimate clash of roles, resulted in an ethical crossroads. Was it worth abandoning a commitment to empowerment and depowerment in order to collect pre-test data? A setting for youth participation should involve the creation and consistent maintenance of alternate, empowering roles. The metacommunication of a pre-measure would have been that the teens, again, were in a lesser position of power.

ETHICAL DILEMMA #3: THE LIFE STORY INTERVIEW

The final element to be dropped was the life-story interview itself. I held onto this long after I started working with the teens, thinking that perhaps once our relationships had solidified, I could work the interview into the process. I also tried to think of ways that the interview could serve as a foundation for self-exploration and a jumping-off point for the creation of narratives for the video projects. During this time, I ping-pong-ed constantly back and forth in an attempt to uncover my motives: was I making decisions that I truly felt facilitated the participatory process or was I making decisions based on their potential worth as good data with which to examine my hypothesis?

After the third session of the project, I wrote in my field notes, "I refrain from asking too much…Details of lives feel precious. I feel that I have to check myself so that I am not taking advantage of (the teens) for my own research." At base, what felt most wrong about

the life-story interview (or any of the variations of it I thought up along the way) was the depth of personal detail interviewees were asked to divulge. I was told by one of the participants the first day I met her, "There is nothing happy about my childhood." I knew, from casual conversations, that the girls' pasts included physical abuse, alcoholic and drug-addicted parents, time spent in foster care and, of course, incarceration. Conducting an interview that asked for the divulgence of personal experiences felt like what Smith characterized as "'stealing' knowledge in a non-reciprocal and often underhanded way" or an "open-cast mining approach to research (see, take and destroy)" [42].

According to O'Neill, "ethical dilemmas arise in situations that involve multiple loyalties and conflicting demands"[43]. Although O'Neill was referring to the loyalties a community-based researcher may have to multiple stakeholders, in this case the conflicting loyalties were between myself (representing the scholarly community) and the teens with whom I was working. I felt constantly torn between wanting to collect data to answer my research questions and acknowledging that the act of collecting that data did not benefit or reflect the needs of the teens in any way. This included the life-story interview but also encompassed any video footage we shot as part of practice exercises, the youth "reflection" notes (which I also dropped), and even casual conversations that we had because of my awareness that I would be later writing field notes.

To reconcile these endless back and forth debates I was having with myself, I developed a measure in my head for gauging whether or not I could go through with a planned process. I simply asked: "Is it for me or is it for them?" That is, in whose service was the activity created? If the balance of the answer fell into the "for me" category, I decided that that element of the process should be abandoned. This simple benchmark became my guide and represented, for me, a switch away from attempting to marry traditional research methods with the participatory framework. After this, I left traditional research methods and the entire quasi-experiment behind me and proceeded with the project without the explicit intention of systematically studying methodology.

DISCUSSION

Previous attempts to explicitly study participatory visual methodology have employed positivist standards of rigor and been non-participatory in nature[44]. In designing a small pilot study of methodological practices in participatory video, I also employed non-participatory methods and drew upon positivist standards of rigor. This approach led to several ethical dilemmas. The fundamental elements of the methods I sought to employ clashed with the underlying principles of youth participation. In moving forward, I can see several alternate ways one might go about studying youth media methodology that would be less likely to conflict with participatory ethics. As "the potential benefits of participation on youth have not been identified by systematic research"[45], the following conclusions can extend beyond participatory video to include investigation into all youth participation processes.

One solution would be to employ participatory evaluation techniques[46]. Although appealing, this is also problematic in that it places an undue burden on participants. Participatory action research generally involves investigations into issues that impact the lives of participants. Questions of methodology extend beyond the local context and pertain primarily to the community of scholars and participatory video practitioners. These questions are distinct from the evaluation of the effectiveness of a particular project. There is, by all means, a crucial role for youth voice in the study of effective methodology. But, as these questions are, by and large, of professional concern, a full participatory investigation might divert energy and attention away from other more vital elements of the participatory video endeavor.

Another solution would revolve around role clarification. A source of the dilemmas was my attempt to be both researcher and facilitator of a participatory process. These dual roles carry with them different demands and expectations. For instance, even taking field notes felt deceptive, as I had not presented myself to the young people as a researcher. I felt that explaining my research questions at the outset would have been a diversion from engaging in the media produc-

tion process. Therefore, in the study of methodology, it could be helpful to separate the roles of researcher and facilitator.

At the moment I am leaning towards only systematically examining methodological questions with pre-existing youth media organizations. In these cases, I can assume the primary role of researcher and examine constructs and outcomes that are pertinent to the young people and adults in a given context. In the creation of future youth media projects, I will privilege the role of adult facilitator over one of researcher. That is, my primary intent will not be the explicit study of methodology. In this way, the needs of the local context and specific group of young people can drive the project focus.

A third solution could involve the explicit application of participatory ethics to a non-participatory research process. Participatory ethics include "addressing asymmetries of power, privilege, and knowledge production," "an ethical stance against neutrality," and "a deep respect for relationships"[47]. The right to study methodology, to request young people to be research subjects rather than co-investigators, must be earned. It needs to be built upon trust and relationships. Like a gardener, one cannot think about taking anything away until much hard work, time and commitment has been invested into an endeavor. It could be possible, once relationships have been established, trust has been built, and young people have been given voice and agency through a participatory video process, that a comparative study of methodology could be proposed to the youth. Elements such as randomization, pre- and post-tests, and specific measures could be negotiated. In this way, a quasi-experimental design could be implemented that was built upon relationships and promoted youth agency by requiring their input and approval to proceed with the study.

Outside of specific approaches to the study of participatory video methodology, another important element that arose from this experience was the central role that "gut feelings" played in the navigation of ethics. Each time an element of the study was abandoned, it was because it initially just didn't "feel" right.

It is not possible to operationalize "gut feelings" nor can they be included on any list of ethical guidelines or mandated by an Institutional Review Board. They are the ethical indicators that come from being human, that remind us that investigations into human matters are fundamentally interactions between people and rely not only on our intellect but on our feelings and intuitions as well. A strong commitment to participatory ethics entails the *internalization* of a sense of social responsibility. This commitment resides within the researcher herself. As the enactment of social responsibility will inevitably look different in different situations[48], the ethics of this commitment can never be fully articulated by lists of rules. Attention to intuition and to gut feelings can help to identify ethical conflicts that will inevitably slip through the cracks of any set list of regulations or guidelines. For these very reasons, I am suggesting that a commitment to participatory ethics requires privileging feelings of discomfort in conjunction with rational explanations for these feelings in the navigation of ethical practices.

CONCLUSION

This paper is titled "Swimming Upstream" because the process described here, that of putting into practice a traditional research design that seemed straightforward on paper, felt much like trying to swim with a strong current pushing against me. The forces driving that current were the fundamental tenets upon which youth participation is based: challenging constructions of young people as powerless and incompetent, breaking down adult/youth power relations, and providing opportunities for the exertion of youth agency. While there is a clear need for systematic studies of the impacts of youth media practices, the methodology of such studies must be sensitive to these fundamental tenets of participation. If studies are designed with participatory ethics in mind, then their implementation should flow with the current of the youth media endeavor, both aiding and being aided by the overall goal of youth empowerment.

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17 There do exist guides that focus specifically on participatory video techniques (e.g. Shaw and Robertson, 1997). These detail specific exercises but don't provide theoretical grounding upon which one could shape methodological decisions for a particular context. I am somewhat critical of these guides because I have tried, on many occasions, to implement the exercises within them and have run into problems each time.

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