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Using Digital Storytelling in Participatory Research With Refugee Women

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Abstract

As a researcher focusing on the health and well-being of people from refugee backgrounds, I strive for genuinely participatory research approaches, and digital storytelling represents one creative and useful way to achieve this aim. Digital stories are short narratives combining images, videos, or music, and a voiceover about one's particular experiences. I draw on my experiences undertaking a visual ethnographic project with a small group of single refugee women with children in Brisbane, Australia, to discuss some of the intricacies of using visual-based research methods in this context. There are many benefits of using digital storytelling as a research method in health contexts. Essentially, the major advantage relates to giving participants the opportunity to shape the research process and content in ways that are beneficial to them, hence facilitating a sense of agency. Researchers are mere facilitators in this participant-driven process. Concurrently, the use of this method also implies extensive time and energy so that the process is supportive and beneficial to participants, and researchers should always remain genuinely concerned about ensuring that the story that is told fits with participants' aspirations. Another consideration involves assessing key ethical concerns that are unique to the use of digital storytelling and warrants further reflection on the part of researchers. I conclude by offering some thoughts about the nature of genuine or meaningful participation in health and well-being research to ensure that, rather than being a tokenistic notion, participation remains a central concern of the digital storytelling process from beginning to end.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Have a better understanding of the methodological challenges involved in using digital storytelling with refugee women
- Understand the intricacies of participatory research particularly using visual methods
- Understand the role of researchers and participants in a genuinely participatory research process
- Assess the usefulness of digital storytelling in health and well-being research

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Introduction

I feel privileged to be a researcher in the broad field of health and well-being. My particular area of interest is refugee mental health and well-being (particularly refugee women), and I use visual-based methods to understand their lived experiences and conceptualizations of health and well-being. When I talk about my interests in visual ethnography, I encourage my audience

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to think about this: in 50 years time, when others look back on our current body of knowledge on health and well-being, what are they going to find out about how the world is today? Whose stories are they going to come across? Whose narratives are going to be privileged, and what are they going to learn about people's lived experiences?

I would like my research "legacy" to speak to the experiences of people who have lived through many challenges to their health and well-being and who were able to find ways to resume a sense of normalcy and agency in their everyday lives. As an academic, I strive to use genuinely participatory research approaches with people from refugee backgrounds, and digital storytelling represents one creative and useful way to achieve this aim. Digital stories are short (usually 3- to 5-min long) narratives combining images, videos or music, and a voiceover about one's particular experiences. A great digital storytelling project, like any meaningful and creative endeavor, requires a number of key ingredients:

- A good computer or laptop (Mac or PC) with the right software and plenty of memory space;
- A small bucket of money;
- A genuine commitment to conveying participants' stories in the way they want;
- A great deal of patience, creativity, and enthusiasm.

Project Overview and Context

During my PhD studies from 2005 to 2010, I undertook a total of 35 semi-structured interviews with a small group of eight refugee women. I then used a combination of photovoice, photo-elicitation, and digital storytelling as part of the visual ethnographic aspect of my fieldwork (see Lenette & Boddy, 2013). It was my Principal Supervisor Associate Professor Mark Brough (Queensland University of Technology) who encouraged me to consider qualitative research methods beyond the traditional interview. These methods would bring a richer dimension to my research. I was excited—but also nervous—about the prospect of having visual-based research methods as part of my collaborative research project with refugee women. In hindsight, I must say that using these methods was by far the most engaging aspects of my research. I have conceptualized the combination of the methods as a process with a logical progression, from semi-structured interviews, to photovoice, through to photo-elicitation, and then onto digital storytelling (Lenette & Boddy, 2013). Indeed, jumping straight into the digital storytelling aspect without at least conducting some interviews using photo-elicitation, for instance, would yield quite distinct outcomes because building a strong relationship of trust between researcher(s) and participants is essential to the process.

My sampling was purposive as I wanted to collaborate with women who self-identified as being

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from refugee backgrounds, irrespective of countries of origin, ethnic backgrounds, visa categories, age, time spent in Australia, or English-language proficiency. I worked in the multicultural sector at the time and already had an established network of key contacts. As I began fieldwork, I contacted a Sudanese refugee woman who worked in a community-based organization. In addition to accepting to participate, she provided the contact details of other refugee women whom she thought would be keen to be involved. Thus, the snowball technique was used over several weeks to engage eight women in total. I always knew I wanted to focus on the resilience of refugee women as the topic of my PhD research, and over time, the focus shifted to encompass participants' sociocultural conceptualizations of well-being alongside resilience. My initial research findings also suggested that the circumstances of six out of eight refugee women who were single (i.e., widowed, separated, or divorced) and raised their children alone in Australia were distinct from that of women who were married. And so, I focused on three women who were single with children when I undertook the digital storytelling project (only three were able to participate throughout the whole research).

The potential for storytelling and participant-led methods to inform theoretically grounded approaches to address complex problems is significant (see, for instance, Boydell, Solimine, & Siona, 2016; Gubrium, Krause, & Jernigan, 2014; Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2015). Visual ethnography refers to the use of visual-based data (such as photographs, artwork, and films) to record, document, and explain the lived realities and perceptions of people (Berg, 2008). Visual ethnography is becoming increasingly popular in cross-cultural studies, and there is broader potential for using audio-visual methods such as digital storytelling to allow individuals to maintain ownership of narratives and create authentic pathways for engagement due to their dialogical nature (Lenette & Boddy, 2013; Pink, 2007). Visual ethnographic methods can

- Reveal nuances in lived realities, as complex experiences cannot be fully conveyed through textual data alone;
- Yield more critical, reflexive methodologies for both researchers and participants;
- Enrich interpretations of emerging data through nuanced understandings of complex situations (Lenette & Boddy, 2013; Pink, 2007).

In feminist research, understanding people's lived experiences through narratives is "best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship" (Oakley, 1981, p. 41). What I find particularly unique about digital storytelling is that it challenges traditional approaches of "asking" for information as defined by research agendas, whereby, even with the best of intentions, researchers set parameters that define how participants may respond. When digital storytelling is used, however, researchers are more likely to set their

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expectations aside and "seek" participants' stories so that participants craft their own stories. The visual ethnographic aspect of my research thus provided an innovative avenue to engage refugee women as co-constructors of knowledge in documenting issues that were of particular importance to them in terms of health and well-being. The three participants I worked with during that phase were enthusiastic and keen to see what would emerge from our collaboration using digital means.

Challenges

As I knew nothing about visual ethnography, I learned a new methodology as part of my fieldwork; this required a lot of time and dedication—and some funds. A key text I consulted, Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography*, was a great starting point. I also read a lot about photovoice and photo-elicitation (see Berg, 2008), and these aspects were relatively easy to incorporate in my research. For the digital storytelling element, however, I enlisted the help of a storytelling facilitator who taught me the basics of the process using iMovie on my Mac. One of the key lessons he shared was that the *story*, that is, the audio recording of the participant's voice, should be the hero of the digital story, not the visuals. As such, I saw myself as a mere facilitator with the skills to record the women's stories digitally, but they were the ones driving the process to select the content and structure. Their voices were literally the focus of the process. Nevertheless, embracing this method meant that I had to invest additional time and resources to achieve my aim of using a collaborative research process effectively.

Some proponents of digital storytelling argue for a workshop-style approach, where participants are invited to daylong sessions to learn skills to put their own stories together themselves (for instance, Digital Storytellers, 2016; Storycentre, 2016). I did not have the resources to organize such a workshop, so I decided to work with each participant individually. In any case, not all participants will be comfortable in a group setting and may prefer the privacy of their own home to share particular details of their stories. Individual sessions required a lot of time on their part too (as would a workshop format). One woman in particular wanted her story to be "perfect" and put a lot of pressure on herself to "get it right." It still amazes me that refugee participants do not see anything "worthwhile" about their trajectories and often wonder how to make their stories interesting to others. The writing and recording of the scripted narrative of their stories presented a great opportunity to remind them that their life journey and the things that were important to their health and well-being were precisely what audiences wanted to know. Nevertheless, researchers have a duty of care toward participants who have to tell and retell their stories many times during the digital storytelling process. It is likely that some minor distress may occur, and researchers need to ensure that appropriate support is available for participants if needed.

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There is no doubt that this process is time-consuming and demands a different level of involvement when compared with, for instance, interviews alone. Particularly when participants' language proficiency is limited, writing and reading from a script while being recorded can become quite a laborious process. One must also consider the long-term impact on participants who so generously agree to be part of a research process and then perhaps realize that it requires more time and energy than initially anticipated (see below).

Benefits

There are many benefits of using visual ethnographic methods in health and well-being research, which constitutes an increasing trend in the health field (Beltran & Begun, 2014; Boydell et al., 2016; Drew, Duncan, & Sawyer, 2010; Gubrium et al., 2014; Lenette & Boddy, 2013; Wexler, Eglinton, & Gubrium, 2014). Essentially, the major advantage relates to giving participants the opportunity to shape the research process and content in ways that are beneficial to them, hence facilitating a sense of agency. In relation to refugee participants in particular, there are three key benefits:

- The process offers an opportunity to include content in their mother tongue, as well as music or phrases that are meaningful to them. Furthermore, visual research methods are useful to express abstract ideas (which are sometimes difficult to translate to and from English) as well as including sensitive topics such as loss, grief, hope, or death; visuals, like photos of abstract art or drawings, can replace words when it becomes too difficult to describe concepts.
- Although at times it is difficult to "summarize" their life stories to a 3-min script, the digital story process offers a relatively quick and engaging way of sharing key aspects of participants' realities with a wider audience. It encourages participants to focus on a few essential aspects that really matter to them and can (and should) then be used in a context where each narrator can elaborate further on their story.
- Participants have an "output" as a result of their engagement in the research process, so there is an element of reciprocity. This challenges the "dip-in, dip-out" research approaches that have characterized health research for so long; the creation of digital stories gives participants a memento as a concrete outcome of their participation. Indeed, my participants reported sharing their digital stories with many members of their local communities as well as family members overseas. Their children learnt new details about their mothers' experiences and developed a sense of pride for all their accomplishments in arduous times. As such, the digital story can become part of the "family album" that remains over the years.

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Tips

- Use a storyboard (can be a simple table in Word) to organize ideas for audio and visuals together, to ensure that the overall narrative flows and makes sense to participants.
- Encourage the participant to limit herself or himself to a specific length when writing the script, as this has the potential to have more impact on the viewer/listener.
- Ensure participants understand the potential for their story to be distributed and viewed widely if they agree to it.

Because of the benefits of using this method, the use of digital storytelling is definitely worth the additional time, energy, and resources invested, as these benefits clearly outweigh some of the challenges outlined above. When a researcher engages in the digital storytelling process, she or he is doing much more than merely recording lived experiences; researchers and participants alike engage in an ongoing reflective process, constantly going back and forth over the content, its meaning, and its link to other parts of participants' stories.

Research Practicalities: Refugee Women's Realities

As mentioned above, only three women were able to participate in the digital storytelling project, and so it is important to acknowledge refugee women's realities as collaborators in research endeavors. Although I refer here to refugee women in particular, the considerations I outline are relevant to many research participants who are considered as "vulnerable" in research terms and have traditionally been excluded from research processes.

I was very grateful for all the time my participants set aside to talk to me despite juggling full-time and part-time work, childcare responsibilities, community leader commitments, tertiary studies, or English-language classes, on top of day-to-day household management responsibilities. It is always difficult to ensure that research projects do not place undue additional pressures on participants, who, despite their enthusiasm to be involved, can find it very difficult to carve out time to meet, or respond to questions, or work on a digital storytelling project over several months. Because we developed a great collaborative relationship (not just as part of this research but also a result of working in the same field of refugee resettlement), my participants wanted to support me to achieve my research aims. I was conscious that often they had to forego time with their children or working on assignments, for example, because they were spending time talking to me.

As much as possible, I tried to assist with "reconciling" their multiple commitments by integrating research activities as part of their daily routines. For example, I would meet participants at their place of residence to ensure they could also spend time with their children

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while we talked. I also met one participant during her lunch breaks at work. During our meetings, I discussed day-to-day worries such as keeping their phone bills manageable, where to get the cheapest petrol, or how to structure their assignments so that the time spent together was beneficial in many ways—indeed, refugee women do not always want to talk about issues linked to trauma, mental health, and exile; in a resettlement context, we share common concerns that are also part of their everyday realities.

Although they were not paid for their time in the project, it was important for me to give them a token of my appreciation. I thoroughly enjoyed Shaun Tan's illustrated story, *The Arrival*. Given that my participants and I were all new migrants to Australia, I thought this would be a nice reminder of the time spent together in the context of research. It is important to find a way to thank participants for their generosity in terms of time and storytelling, even if (or particularly when) payment is not a possibility.

Finally, it is essential to consider the women's contributions broadly in the digital storytelling process—the unintended outcomes are as important as the intended ones. It would not be surprising if participants rarely used specific terms like mental health or health or well-being. Researchers should become skilled at listening *deeply* and making inferences about health and well-being concepts even when participants do not name these terms specifically. Indeed, there are many ways of expressing ideas about health and well-being, and each individual may have her or his own "lexicon" that makes sense to them. It is always exciting to discover new ways of expressing health and well-being ideas and concepts from participants' perspectives.

The Ethics Question

Ethics committees increasingly respond positively to applications with visual-based elements due to the wider use of visual databases and collections as sources of data, as well as the increasing use of digital methods to document lived experiences. It is not unusual though for ethics committees to ask for further clarification when visual methods are included, as committee members are conscious that these methods imply a different set of ethical challenges and want to ensure that no harm is caused to participants, particularly if they are easily identifiable. In my experience, refugee participants have a strong sense of agency, and when they decide to be part of a research project that concerns their health and well-being, they wish to be identified as the narrators and storytellers and hope that many people will witness their digital story—refugee participants feel very strongly about this aspect. I have discussed some ethical considerations linked to the method in my academic work (Lenette & Boddy, 2012; Lenette et al., 2015) and the idea that de-identifying their story can further dehumanize participants and cause them to relinquish part of their agency. Nevertheless, one

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of the points I also raise is about ensuring that participants understand the permanent nature of the recording, and so, they need to imagine that their story—if they agree to share it widely—can be seen by anyone, anywhere, at any point in time. Would this consideration affect how they choose to represent their stories? Concurrently, the digital stories are and should remain the property of participants, and it is up to them to decide how to disseminate their narratives, particularly in the long term.

Lessons Learned

Participation

The notion of participation, or participatory research as it relates to this context, can translate to many different forms in practice, not all of which are meaningful or ethical. I was always committed to ensuring that my participants drove the research process as co-constructors of knowledge, and so their wishes were respected in terms of the content shared and in relation to our interactions during the digital storytelling project (but also once it was completed).

Trust

In my experience, participants know from the outset whether a researcher or research team can be trusted. They have a great “radar” to identify people genuinely concerned about understanding their circumstances, who will treat their stories with the respect they deserve. Trust cannot be bought, or as the popular saying goes, “Trust comes on foot but departs on horseback.” Trust is an essential element for the researcher to render participants’ stories through digital storytelling. This should not be confused with doing everything perfectly—indeed, in my undergraduate days, one of my lecturers said, “Thou shall make mistakes.” What research participants appreciate is that if a researcher unintentionally does something wrong and is prepared to learn from that mistake, then participants are more likely to share their experiences openly and connect on a human level.

Post-Project

It was important for me that my participants remain involved in the later stages of the research, so at the conclusion of the digital storytelling project, I invited two of them to my final presentation where I had to “defend” my thesis and also to my graduation. At that stage of the research, I was only in touch with two participants because they worked in the refugee resettlement field and were particularly interested to hear what I had to say. I was very pleased to see them at my graduation ceremony (and indeed hear them cheer me along when my name was called) as it signified that even though I was receiving the award, this research was about them and indeed would not exist if it were not for their participation. I also thought they would

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appreciate receiving copies of my thesis considering they were both undertaking tertiary studies at the time. My only regret is that I had lost touch with the other two participants whose experiences were included in my thesis as case studies. I sent them copies of the Shaun Tan book but did not get a chance to see them post-project.

Dissemination

Another aspect of collaborative research is co-authoring of publications. I was unsure about how much I would use from my thesis toward academic publications and so did not think of involving my participants in the writing stage. But since then, I include project partners and participants—with their consent—as co-authors of relevant publications, without, however, placing any writing burden on them. Indeed, research partners and participants are crucial to the conceptualization of a project or data collection and analysis. Because of this experience, I now include a strong element of ongoing participation in all my grant applications such as requesting funds for participants to attend conferences to present their own findings post-project. Health and well-being researchers always need to redefine what they mean by meaningful participation so that it does not become a tokenistic notion. Digital storytelling involves a deeply collaborative approach that should not end abruptly at the conclusion of the recording but should continue well into the dissemination phase, to further ensure participants feel a sense of ownership.

Conclusion

When digital storytelling projects are successful, they make for wonderful opportunities to acknowledge the strengths and resilience of refugee participants as important counter-narratives to dominant, polemic discourses. The digital storytelling process has the potential to be transformative for the participants and researchers alike. Digital storytelling can convey refugee health and well-being experiences in all their complexities and, by doing so, challenge the notion of a “single” story about refugees. To achieve this aim though, researchers have to engage in an ethical and genuinely participatory process of inquiry that privileges the stories of participants.

Conversely, there are many ways that digital storytelling projects can “go wrong.” There is always a danger of using reductive labels when working with “refugees” in a research context, and of “fetishizing” individuals from this background, particularly when considering trauma and mental health concepts. Such a narrow approach can run the risk of overshadowing narratives that are much more important to participants. In my digital storytelling projects, I have found that participants want to tell a particular story; although researchers may have a set agenda or be funded for a specific purpose, it is crucial to be sensitive to *the story that participants want to*

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tell. Otherwise, it does not matter how much time and funding is dedicated to a digital storytelling project—the stories will sound hollow; sometimes, the most important audience member to consider is the storyteller herself or himself. Furthermore, placing undue pressures on participants to spend disproportionate amounts of time and energy on such a project can cause the initiative to backfire. In addition, participants do not always foresee the potential reach of their stories in a digital format, until the spotlight is thrust on them; while exciting, this prospect can also be overwhelming.

To sum up,

- Be ethical in your approach—it is important that researchers keep this in mind at all stages of the research process.
- Remember that you are a facilitator, and participants should decide on the content and how to proceed with the digital storytelling project.
- Let go of the process. You will be amazed at what can emerge from a participant-driven digital storytelling project.
- You are privileged to be receiving some wonderful narratives that mean a lot to participants—enjoy the process.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. How do you ensure that participants drive the research agenda at all times (as opposed to the researcher/research team/funding body)?
2. What are some further ethical concerns that can arise with the use of digital storytelling in terms of privacy and dissemination?
3. Why is it still important to have gender-focused research projects? What are some potential limitations?
4. How can we ensure that visual-based research findings are used effectively in policy-making? And what are the difficulties of linking research findings to policy processes?

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