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The use of arts-based methods in community-based research with vulnerable populations: Protocol for a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

In the last couple of years we have witnessed a growing body of published articles featuring arts-based research methods. However, a shared vocabulary concerning this type of studies is lacking. This protocol outlines a procedure to systematically map and categorize the characteristics of community-based research projects using arts-based methods. It provides insights in our search strategy, our in- and exclusion criteria and the methodological choices we have made. The final review will help us to understand how arts-based methods are currently defined and applied in research practice within the broad field of humanities. We invite colleague researchers to comment on the protocol or to get involved in our review project.

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Recently, there has been an increasing interest in the use of arts-based methods as a research approach. The use of arts-based research (ABR) methods as an approach to scientific inquiry originally grew out of the practice of creative arts therapy, in which artistic methods were used alongside therapeutic techniques to help people cope with their life situation (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010; McNiff, 2008).

In the last two decades, researchers from other disciplines have successfully adopted ABR methods in their research inquiries: first, in artistic and design research (e.g. Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2005); and second, in the broad field of humanities including social and cultural sciences, public health and educational sciences (Brazg, Bekemeier, Spigner, & Huebner, 2010; Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Hornsby-Miner, 2007).

However, a shared vocabulary that can facilitate the communication about what constitutes ABR appears to be lacking. In an attempt to contribute to this debate, we will conduct a scoping review to synthesize the literature on the use of ABR methods in the area of community-based research, inspired by a social pedagogical lens to inquiry, hereby cutting across disciplines such as sociology, social welfare, criminology and educational sciences. More specifically, we target research studies that apply artistic methods to promote community change.

The aim of this review project is: (1) to provide an overview of the use of arts-based research methods over a 20-year timespan, in the area of community-based research, (2) to assist researchers in deciding on appropriate definitions and

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applications in their own use of ABR, by giving them a firm grasp of how arts based methods are currently described, used, and compare to each other, and (3) to promote best practices by formulating recommendations on how art and research can be better integrated in the broad field of the humanities.

1. Background

1.1. Conceptualizing ABR

ABR can be defined as “a research method in which the arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research method. Art forms [...] are essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analyzing data, and presenting the research results.” (Austin & Forinash, 2005, p. 458–459).

There is a large variety of artistic methods and artistic ways of representation. Examples include visual methods (e.g. photography, collages, murals, carving, quilting and painting), narrative methods (e.g. poetry, fiction, novel) and performative methods (e.g. film-making, theater, dance).

Traditionally, ABR methods have been applied either as a data collection technique or as a dissemination technique. In the first case, the art forms are considered research data in their own right. Images, sculptures or collages replace the traditional interview excerpts or observational data or support the interpretation process of the researcher. In this case, art is used as a medium that allows research participants to ‘communicate’ with researchers about their situation, experiences, concerns, challenges or obstacles in daily life. In the second case, ABR methods are used as a medium to translate an outcome of a particular research project, replacing a traditional research report and moving away from the traditional focus on textual accounts of phenomena under investigation (Foster, 2012). In this case, the art form is considered the vehicle for dissemination of research findings. The findings may present themselves as a drama or dance performance, exhibition of images or visual representation, an artifact or a collage (Bach, 1998; Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Gray et al., 2000; Harrington & Schibik, 2003; Saldana, 2003).

Researchers using ABR methods are often situated within the qualitative research tradition that questions the triumphs of science and rationality (Bentz & Shapiro, as cited in Butterwick, 2002). They are motivated to challenge our conventions and assumptions about what constitutes research. Not surprisingly, the whole debate on the place and role of ABR methods in scientific and academic inquiry has been fueled by paradigm shifts, such as the emergence of the postmodern period welcoming a more pluralistic attitude toward research (Leavy, 2009).

In line with other qualitative research traditions, ABR projects have been assigned many good qualities, not in the least the fact that they open up a space for experimentation. In seeking other ways of interpreting the world, researchers can create “vivid realities that would otherwise go unknown” (Eisner, 2008, p. 11). Researchers engaging with ABR methods often claim that, to some extent, the uncomfortable marriage between art and social inquiry allows them to closely connect with “the realms of local, personal, everyday places and events” (Finley, 2008, p. 71). In doing so, it removes academics from their ivory towers. Moreover, the use of ABR methods encourages them to produce a less tangible knowledge, to explore the nuances of lived experiences and to foster dialog, rather than providing direct answers (Foster, 2012). As a result, these methods can provide us with “an amazing array of possibilities for creative research work: new fields of study, new things about which to inquire, new methods of inquiry, new ways of combining knowledge of different fields, new ways to incorporate yourself and your social background into your research, new technologies to play with, and new social relationships with peers” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 3, as cited in Butterwick, 2002).

1.2. Introducing our review case

The proposed review project will address ABR projects in the area of community-based research targeting vulnerable populations. The choice to focus on community-based research is inspired by the fact that many of the researchers working in this field are trained in the use of creative and artistic methods, to unlock the potential of the often vulnerable populations they work with. One of the main reasons why ABR methods have been picked up by researchers in the field of community-based research, and humanities more generally, is the fact that traditional research methods have not always been able to fully engage with particular groups in society. This is certainly the case for vulnerable people, for instance those who have limited language abilities or those who suffered major trauma’s or severe life circumstances (Cosenza, 2010; Mullen, Buttignol, & Diamond, 2005). These people are harder to reach, but also less able to raise their voice.

ABR methods may be able to overcome at least a fraction of these problems, by reducing the focus on the written word and looking at other means of communication, not only to gain access to deeper layers of meaning, but also to address power relations in research processes (Foster, 2012). In many ABR projects participants are invited to play a more active role in the research process (Purcell, 2009). The participants may feel empowered due to their own participation in the artistic process. They are in control. According to Foster (2012), this would increase the likelihood that we can access fundamental aspects of human experience like power, fear, loss, desire, hope or suffering and this transforms ABR into an important tool to facilitate community inclusion in social investigation (Finley, 2005). In addition, the use of artistic elements in participatory research processes can foster a process of critical reflection, where community members learn to see ‘private troubles as public issues’ (Purcell, 2009) and create ideas for their own lives and the community. Very often, this induces community action and community change. As Thiele and Marsden (2003, p. 89) conclude: “Using arts in the community is about ‘building

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