



Ethics of care across professional and everyday positionalities: The (un)expected impacts of participatory video with young female carers in Slovakia



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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a critical intervention into the debates on research impact, theorising the potential of underpinning research agendas by ethics of care. We explore how a range of vectors of care, both intimate and distant, emerged in collaborative activities between researchers based in the UK and community youth workers and teenage female carers in Slovakia, leading to a series of (un)expected outcomes. We argue that while all research impacts cannot be planned in advance, an ethics of care embedded in relationships within and beyond research settings may form conditions in which outcomes exceeding the initial expectations can be anticipated. To achieve this, we argue for questioning the distinctions between academic and non-academic collaborators, legitimising diverse forms of knowledge, action and impact in institutional policies, and for conceiving research projects from the beginning as “more-than-research” avenues.

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Introduction

The figure above is from a short video (attached to this paper) produced by two girls aged 13 and 14 from Kopčany, a small peripheral neighbourhood of Bratislava, Slovakia. The video was the outcome of an engagement between some of the authors, the girls and others in the neighbourhood. It documents the views of Hana and Elena¹ on the unsuitability of the neighbourhood's environment for children and young people as they reflect on their experiences as regular carers for other children from their extended families and friendship networks. The video still-shot captures the moment when one of Elena's young relatives throws a stone at an approaching truck just when her carer's attention lapses briefly. It illustrates the close proximity of the industrial landscape and traffic to children's everyday activities in Kopčany. It also exemplifies the apparent ordinariness of interactions between these children and their precarious environment, reinforcing the demand of the video's title “Kopčany: neighbourhood needs a playground”.

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¹ Names have been changed.

In this paper we reflect on how this specific example of participatory video² (PV) undertaken between young people and a team of practitioners and/or researchers both draws from and intervenes in the gendered patterns of (child)care among young people from urban Slovakia, which are in turn affected by post-socialist transformations of welfare, urban development and socio-demographics. By exploring not only the girls' accounts presented in the video but also the video's production and subsequent impact on the neighbourhood's environment and social relations, we extend our focus on care to incorporate the girls' direct caring practices as well as the relations between the girls, their community and those involved in the project. We interweave two settings of care: the experiences, practices and social relationships of young female carers from Slovakia in their neighbourhood; and the network of engagements between the girls, community youth workers and academics from abroad. Empirically we track how ethics of care materialise, embedded in research and community work practice and in the entanglements of connections between processes of intimate and distant caring that (in part) constitute these settings. Through this we develop a notion

² Participatory video itself, and its socio-technological aspects, are not the subject of this paper. However, Blazek and Hraňová (2012) discuss this in relation to another PV project in the same neighbourhood.

of impact that is constructed beyond a narrow “academia-to-users” vector.³ Our work commenced as a small community youth work project intended to provide a free-time activity to young teenagers over the summer vacation, but it evolved into a research process shedding light on patterns of care in a post-socialist urban periphery and on changes to the neighbourhood’s infrastructure, including a new playground funded by the local council. By attending to this genesis, our ultimate focus is on examining how an ethics of care can function as a foundational perspective for collaboration beyond academia and subsequently as a source and channel of unintended, organic and diverse impacts (Fuller and Askins, 2007). Thus an ethics of care frames the expectation of some kind of impacts, but is fundamentally open as to the specifics of the impacts – they are (un)expected. Later in the paper, we articulate this (un)certainly as a proposal for reframing the increasingly narrowly-defined criteria used for institutional evaluation of research impact (Taylor, 2014; Turner, 2014). We mirror this strategy also in our writing style: details about the project and its outcomes/impacts are presented gradually so the paper offers an experience to readers, which is similar to what we experienced in the project: an ongoing unfolding of events, relationships and consequences which matches and at the same time exceeds initial expectations.

Our analysis is situated within feminist perspectives on care. Care has been recognised as an important but commonly overlooked element of everyday lives, particularly in relation to socio-economic marginalisation and exclusion (Bowlby, 2011), but also through its emotional and power dynamics in lived experiences (Bondi, 2008). Research on care has widened understandings of agency, highlighting the importance of caring practices in the private sphere and how they are downplayed in dominant political and economic discourses (Haylett, 2003; Lawson, 2007). Focusing on care offers insights into geographies of the life-course, family and bonding (Bowlby et al., 2010) and underlines the importance of intergenerational relationships in everyday life strategies, particularly through the gendered organisation of care duties (McKie et al., 2004). Care also frequently underpins oppressive and restrictive structures of intimate relationships, both for those impacted by duties of caregiving and those who require and rely on care (Bondi, 2008).

Apart from being an object of study, care has also been argued to constitute an ethical foundation for social theory and research which points directly to the importance of connectivity and active collaboration (Held, 2007). In feminist geography, an emphasis on collective engagement with critical reflexivity has been translated into collaborative writing projects (WGSG, 1984, 1997; Laurie et al., 1999; Bondi et al., 2002) and in rich engagement with communities, activists and practitioners that entail outcomes and impacts beyond the textual (Townsend et al., 1995; Sharp, 2005; Johnston and Pratt, 2010; Pratt, 2010; Askins and Pain, 2011; Rodó-de-Zárate, 2014). In this regard, positionalities – and their relations – may be seen as an ‘instrument’ (England, 1994) that makes research possible, and they require attention. As we expand the notion of research beyond the processes of data collection in the field to encompass wider relationships that trigger the generation of impacts, we need also to explore how different positionalities enact different attitudes and practices of care

relevant to this project and which, we argue, make the (un)expected impacts of the project possible. We would argue that whereas there might be a discernible difference in the positionalities of researchers, practitioners and young carers if *research* is taken as the cornerstone of our activities, placing *care* at the centre of our analysis problematises some of these divisions, revises the architecture of field engagements, and fabricates new grounds for thinking about outcomes of academic/non-academic collaboration.

Our paper relates to both these contexts – of care as a focus of research and as a foundation for research praxis – and to their intersections as we narrate one community project where, through an ethics of care, commitment to collaboration, and reflexive critical practice through the platforms of PV and community youth work, a series of outcomes was produced centred around the experiences and wellbeing of young female carers in Slovakia. Outcomes included new knowledge about local care patterns, situated in the broader socio-economic context of post-socialist Slovakia, alongside informal educational activities and new social capital through community development. Research had an intricate role in this: on the one hand, it established the foundations for the overall collaboration, but on the other hand it was only one – rather unexpected and belated – element of the PV project itself. We argue that it was the ethics of care, coalesced around critically informed attention to the gendered patterns of child care in the deprived neighbourhood along with pooled professional expertise which fostered the outcomes, rather than a meticulously pre-written and subsequently accomplished plan of work. Advocating transgressions of neatly demarcated professional positions and roles, we suggest that commitment to collaboration beyond the academy and to an ethics of care has a strong potential to nurture unforeseen impacts and developments but also long-term relationships and further capacities among academic, professional and residential communities. The entangled on-going relations of research-practice-collaboration around projects such as this lead us to argue for expanded notions of impact which value the unexpected, contingent and non-linear outcomes and effects of engagements beyond (and yet also within) the academy. This strategy entails uncertainty and unpredictability, posing a challenge in current funding and institutional regimes of academic work (Cupples and Pawson, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2014). In light of recent critiques of dominant notions of academic impact (Pain et al., 2011; Rogers et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2014) we highlight the complex vectors of care across community spaces, professional practices and academic work which constitute diverse and often highly unpredictable spaces of ‘impact’.

We begin the paper by outlining our positionalities in the project before providing a broader conceptual framing. This connects relational geographies of care (Bowlby et al., 2010) to gendered geographies of caring in post-socialist Slovakia and focusses on ideas of the ethics of care (Hall and McCarroll, 2012) as a basis for integrating the process of collaboration into our overall analysis. We then narrate in detail the phases of the video project in Slovakia, discussing how foundations for (un)expected and organic forms of impact might be built utilising the lenses of the geographies of care and the ethics of care, before providing some wider reflections in the conclusion.

Our positionalities

Before introducing the theoretical context of the paper, we discuss our respective positionalities in the video project and in broader relationships and engagements that underpin our argument. The PV project itself took place in 2010 but we also include any later points of relevance.

³ We begin using ‘vector’ in its most common geometrical sense as a set of direction and length, highlighting the spatiality of care. The linear nature of vector, however, does not take away from the dynamism and organic non-linearity in which the project and its outcomes evolved, as we stress instead the *multiplicity* of connections and the profoundness of the effects various activities and relationships had. There is an analytical strength of the vector (as a singular noun) in emphasising the two-pronged intimacy of encounters between various actors, but throughout the paper, we refer rather to *vectors* (a plural) of care to emphasise the aggregate outcomes of often messy, intense, elusive and even conflicting events.

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