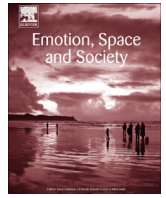




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Participatory action research: The distress of (not) making a difference

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ABSTRACT

Participatory action research (PAR) is alluring for researchers investigating traumatic and sensitive topics. While it is distressing for interviewees to recount these stories – and for researchers to hear them – PAR promises to make the pain worthwhile. *Something good will come of it*. In this paper, I reflect on a PAR project conducted with Tanzanian child domestic workers. Research vignettes are used to highlight moments of emotional complexity unique to PAR projects. First, the emotional burdens of PAR are distributed across a research team. Researchers need to think carefully about the appropriate ‘level’ of participation to pursue. Second, there is no guarantee that the impacts of PAR projects will be unambiguously positive. The risk of doing more harm than good can weigh heavily on the minds of the research team. Third, when PAR projects are conceived with the intent of producing long-lasting structural changes that benefit marginalised people, ‘failure’ can become a source of great distress. Those attempting PAR need to be prepared for the emotional pitfalls of research endeavours that seek to tangibly intervene in traumatised people’s lives.

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1. Introduction

Participatory Action Research (PAR) foregrounds both action and participation. *Action* is central to PAR because it seeks to make tangible, positive changes to the lives of disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and communities. *Participation* refers to the central involvement of community members in all possible stages of research and associated change processes (Pain, 2004; Kesby et al., 2005). PAR affirms the ‘right and ability’ of the ‘researched’ to have a say in decisions which affect their lives (Reason and Bradbury, 2006: 10) and involves working with them to achieve the ‘change that they desire’ (Kendon, 2005: 208). It has been promoted as a beneficial approach when conducting research on children and young people’s lives, precisely because traditional research methods have often denied them the right to ‘speak for themselves’ (Qvortrup, 1994: 2). Over the past two decades numerous researchers have argued that children and young people must be brought into research as they have ‘expert knowledge’ of their lives (Robson, 2001; Kellett et al. 2004: 331). The assumption that adults always know what is in children’s best interests has been thoroughly disputed and disrupted (Jones, 2001). Efforts to

bring children and young people into research projects raise a number of ethical issues, particularly when the topic under investigation is a sensitive one (Robson, 2001; Alderson and Morrow, 2011). There is no one-size-fits all approach to determining when and how children and young people should become involved in research projects. However, many recent discussions of the ethics of involving children and young people in research have erred on the side of adjusting research procedures to minimise the potential for harm, rather than excluding children and young people from research in order to protect them (Matthews et al., 1998; Robson, 2001; Porter et al., 2010; Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

PAR – whether undertaken with adults or children – is also a response to calls for ‘more moral, caring and politically aware’ human geographies (Pain, 2003: 650). It can be particularly appealing for researchers whose work engages with traumatic issues and traumatised people because it promises to give something back. Human geographers are ‘socialised to be concerned’ but typically have little to offer informants in return for their willingness to divulge distressing personal narratives (Woodby et al., 2011: 835). PAR promises to make research encounters ‘worth the tears’ (Robson, 2001) because it seeks to actively address the circumstances of participants’ trauma. It eases the guilt that many researchers have expressed about extracting traumatic data without offering anything tangible in return (Widdowfield, 2000; Meth and Malaza, 2003; Woodby et al., 2011; Lund, 2012).

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My own involvement with PAR began during a research project with Tanzanian child domestic workers (Klocker, 2011, 2012, 2014). In Tanzania, child domestic workers are predominantly female. They are girls who 'work in other people's households doing domestic chores, caring for children, and running errands' (UNICEF, 1999: 2). They work for pay in cash (or kind), are 'employed' by adults who are not their parents and usually live in their employers' homes (Kifle, 2002). Child domestic work is a survival strategy. It is also ubiquitous: all but the poorest households have child domestic workers. Because child domestic work is carried out in unregulated domestic spaces, the living and working conditions of the young employees are largely at the whim of their employers. Traumatic experiences of abuse, exploitation, humiliation and isolation have been documented in numerous national contexts (Camacho, 1999; Kifle, 2002; Jacquemin, 2004; Rubenson et al., 2004; Klocker, 2011, 2014; Blagbrough, 2008; Bourdillon, 2009; Wasiuzzaman and Wells, 2010). Yet attempts to abolish child domestic work in order to protect working children are problematic because the children involved typically have few alternatives (Klocker, 2011, 2014). I turned to PAR when researching child domestic work because I was aware of these complex and sensitive circumstances. I wanted to avoid investigating other people's pain for the sake of knowledge alone; but as a white, middle-class, western researcher I could not know what Tanzanian girls needed. PAR offered an opportunity to work towards culturally sensitive and locally-relevant action and (in the process) to assuage my academic guilt. *Or so it seemed.*

In this paper I consider the following: traumatic research topics may induce researchers to adopt PAR without a clear understanding of the distressing outcomes that may unfurl as a direct result of this methodological choice. Here, I reflect on the emotional complexities and challenges of a PAR project – conducted on a traumatic issue and with traumatised young people – through a series of research vignettes. These bring together excerpts from interviews and my field diary to reveal the immediacy and emotional tensions of this research project 'in their rawest form' (Humble, 2012: 82; Punch, 2012). They detail elements of PAR for which I was ill-prepared, and which became a source of (researcher, co-researcher and participant) distress in their own right. Emotion affected this research at every level and permeates this paper. The centrality of emotion to research has long been noted by feminist geographers (England, 1994; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Bondi, 2005). Emotions flow through research relationships, practices and contexts (Laurier and Parr, 2000; Widowfield, 2000; Bondi, 2003, 2005; Meth and Malaza, 2003; Bennett, 2004; Punch, 2012); they inform research methods, data collection, data analysis and research findings. The emotions experienced by researchers and research participants add meaning to research, they are 'as real, as important and as interesting as any other product of the interview' (Collins, 1998: 335; see also; Lee-Treweek, 2000; Bennett, 2004; Humble, 2012; Punch, 2012). While all research is 'predicated on and in some ways involves – emotion' (Askins, 2009: 8), this is perhaps most evident when traumatic issues are being investigated. As noted by the authors throughout this special issue, both researchers and participants may struggle to cope with the strain of such research encounters (see also Dunn, 1991; Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Meth and Malaza, 2003; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008; Jones and Ficklin, 2012; Lund, 2012). Emotions are also central to PAR – not least because they motivate researchers to *do something* in response to apparent injustices.¹ PAR makes no pretence of being detached or objective. Under such circumstances, attentiveness to

emotions is paramount – both to minimise the potential for harm, and to account for emotions' influence on research findings and action-oriented outcomes.

2. The research project and team

This paper reports on a participatory and action-oriented investigation into child domestic work conducted in Iringa, Tanzania, from 2005 to 2007. The research team incorporated three former child domestic workers as co-researchers. Faidha Mlossi, Vaileth Mvena and Amina Haule² were aged 17, 15 and 14 (respectively) at the commencement of the research. The research team also included two adult Tanzanian co-researchers: Esther John Malifedha and Paul Mbenna. Esther, Paul and I all had experience and training relevant to the project. Esther and I had previously been trained by, and volunteered for, a non-government organisation in Iringa Municipality. In 2003, we spent seven months living in rural villages surrounding Iringa. Our role was to work at local primary schools where we engaged students and the community in discussions of health and children's rights. It was during this time that I first learned of, and became concerned about, child domestic work. I heard numerous stories of girls who had left their villages to gain employment as child domestic workers only to return disappointed by their experiences. Some had returned HIV positive. I was thus emotionally connected to this issue and to this place before commencing my PhD research. Paul and I both attended an intensive and accredited two-week children's rights advocacy course in Tanzania in early 2005 (before starting fieldwork). During that time I refined the research project based on advice from Tanzanian children's rights experts. The young co-researchers were recruited as a result of their involvement with a local non-government organisation (NGO) engaged in advocacy efforts around child domestic workers' rights. These co-researchers had left child domestic work as a result of their own negative experiences and had developed skills in discussing these issues with other girls and young women through their involvement in that NGO's activities. After being recruited, the young co-researchers received research training from the adult members of the research team over a number of months. This training covered research methods and design (including interview skills), risk assessment and safety procedures, and ethical issues related to informed consent, discussing sensitive issues and confidentiality. The co-researchers were paid for their work. Faidha, Vaileth and Amina were engaged in all stages of the research process: they helped to set the project aims, they collected data and used this information to lobby for change. Data were collected from June 2005 to October 2006 via 30 interviews with current child domestic workers and 34 interviews with former child domestic workers; 25 personal narratives written by former child domestic workers; 57 interviews with employers of child domestic workers; and four focus group discussions with 29 local government leaders.

All data were collected in Kiswahili. Initially, a peer-interviewing model was adopted: the young co-researchers went in pairs to conduct interviews with current and former child domestic workers. The absence of adult team members from these interviews was a deliberate strategy to put the young interviewees at ease (Kellett et al., 2004). For reasons discussed later in this paper, this approach was soon abandoned and one adult always accompanied the young co-researchers for subsequent interviews with current and former child domestic workers. Interviews with adult employers of child domestic workers were always conducted by an

¹ Brown and Pickerill's (2009) excellent special issue on activism and emotional sustainability, published in this journal, provides a useful overview of the role of emotions in compelling and sustaining researchers as activists.

² Amina Haule is a pseudonym. The other young researchers opted to be referred to using their real names in publications resulting from this work.

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