



Critical video engagements: Empathy, subjectivity and changing narratives of water resources through participatory video

Crystal Tremblay*, Leila Harris

Department of Geography, University of Victoria, David Turpin Bldg, Rm B203, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC, V8P 5C2, Canada

Institute for Resources, Environment & Sustainability, University of British Columbia, Vancouver Campus, AERL Building, 429-2202 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Water governance
Community-based research
Subjectivity
Emotions
Participatory video
Urban Africa
Methods

ABSTRACT

This article engages a critical feminist analysis of a community-based participatory video (PV) process focused on water and sanitation issues in underserved settlements of Accra, Ghana and Cape Town, South Africa. With focus on emotions and empathy, we highlight these concepts in relation to participant narratives and shifting subjectivities. In so doing, we consider how arts based engagement (in this case, through participatory video), might serve to foster new ways of relating to water resources and water infrastructures. The analysis highlights how the participants themselves reflect on PV as a vehicle for personal transformation, knowledge co-creation and a shifting sense of their own ‘watered’ subjectivity. We find that the PV process helps to uncover and identify knowledge and process gaps on by enabling individuals and communities—often unheard—to participate in civic and political debates around resource governance. While many positive elements were emphasized, we also suggest that there is a need for critical engagements that also address challenges associated with these methods, including limitations with respect to fostering fundamental long-term change in communities. In the conclusion, we broaden beyond our individual case studies to consider implications for community engagement and citizenship practices in the realm of natural resource governance.

1. Introduction

This paper critically assesses the role Participatory Video (PV) can play in water and sanitation governance through case studies with communities in underserved settlements of Accra, Ghana and Cape Town, South Africa. These case study sites, as with many other regions of the world, are important given concerns related to equitable access and governance of water and sanitation resources. While the broader context of our work highlights issues of citizen engagement, our focus here is on the participants’ changing subjectivities through the research process and the important role emotions and empathy play, both in resource governance, and also in how we understand water and water infrastructures.

It is estimated that globally 783 million people lack access to clean drinking water and an additional 2.5 billion people lack access to improved sanitation – meaning that as much as 37% of the world’s population lack access to basic water and sanitation (UNICEF, 2012). According to UNESCO (2006), this crisis has been mainly caused not by a lack of supply or technology, but rather is a consequence of failures in water governance. Water governance, as described by Castro (2007), involves the interactions around water, including those between

governments, large businesses and political parties, civil and other organizations representing sectoral interests, international agencies, NGOs and other relevant power holders. These competing interests inevitably result in socio-political confrontations around how water and water infrastructures should be governed, and by whom. Developing governance practices and processes grounded in principles of sustainability and social justice therefore “is one of the most urgent challenges facing water governance in the 21st century” (Castro, 2007; p. 99).

There are a number of approaches that attempt to address these complex environmental, political, and social processes that shape the management of water and sanitation, many with the goal of improving access for vulnerable and underserved populations. One approach is through action-oriented community-based initiatives intended to enable communities to participate more meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. Community-based Research (CBR), including Participatory Action Research (PAR), involves focus on collaboration with the populations affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education, enhancing community agency, or effectuating change (Evans and Foster, 2009; Bergold and Thomas, 2012; Hall et al., 2015; Tandon et al., 2016). Those concerned with water governance have highlighted key opportunities that

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: crystal@uvic.ca (C. Tremblay), lharris@ires.ubc.ca (L. Harris).

such approaches may hold to empower communities and work collaboratively towards fundamental change (Figueiredo and Perkins, 2013; Scurrah, 2013; Harris and Morinville, 2013; Perkins, 2014).

Our work here analyzes a Participatory Video (PV) effort undertaken in underserved communities of Accra, Ghana and Cape Town, South Africa between 2015 and 2016, with the overarching aim of working towards improved access to water and sanitation services. More immediately, a goal was to provide a platform for reflection on what might be needed from a community perspective to enable more participatory and equitable water governance. By analyzing narratives of those who participated in the PV exercise, here we consider the successes of the effort, and also engage in critical reflection to enable learning from the work. Based on interviews with the participants we aim to give a sense of their experience of the PV training and production, while also attending to their changing understanding of, and relationship to, issues of unequal and unreliable water and sanitation in their communities (specifically in Site C, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa and Teshie, Accra, Ghana). Among other matters explored through a critical feminist lens, we address self confidence of the participants connected to the experience with video training and production, related narratives of self-transformation, as well as key elements of interest for our analysis including themes of emotions, empathy, changing citizen subjectivities. Further, we also reflect on the potential for, and limitations of, research and training efforts of this type. We provide a brief discussion of what our work suggests in terms of the opportunities and challenges of PV in Section 3.

1.1. Contextualizing subjectivity, emotions, and empathy in participatory video

Neimanis (2013) provides a refreshing take on how a feminist subjectivity ‘watered’ can change our understanding and relationship to other places and beings — in brief, water is porous and necessarily connects diverse bodies, ecologies, and places. Thinking through, and understanding ourselves through water, in turn, can help us to better understand the complex linkages between ourselves and others, our bodies and other living beings that similarly depend on the same resources, and also are subject to the same challenges when water bodies are contaminated. As she suggests, a feminist ‘watery subjectivity’ serves other goals connected to environmental justice and eco-feminist ethics, while also connecting to broader philosophical and epistemological frameworks, including better understanding linkages to questions of language, coloniality and racism. As Neimanis states, by figuring oneself as a body of water, “one can embody these pivots and become the confluence of these questions” (p. 38). This conceptualization weaves together feminist ideas and ethics of embodiment with broader ethical, political and ecological contexts, bearing an influence on how one charts and comes to understand one’s own politics of location—as we are located and embodied in webs of ecological and social relations that bear on our politics and sense of self in important ways.

Such a renewed watery subjectivity can also inspire a renegotiation of the relationship between nature and culture, as well as fostering a feminist and posthumanist appreciation for more-than-human beings. Following from Neimanis, attention to our watery locations and subjectivities, including the ways that we are intimately albeit differently connected to other beings or forms of pollution, we can also effectuate greater attention to systemic oppressions that affect some humans, or species, more than others. As Andrijasevic and Khalili (2013) argue, “by interrogating the formation of subjectivities, bodies and communities, starting with water, we begin to sketch a mode of analysis that would consider how human histories, cultures, and politics are constituted by way of water and how they employ water” (p. 103).¹

¹ See Krieger (2011) for further discussion of eco-social theories that similarly focus on embodiment.

In working with community members on issues of water and sanitation, and using arts based methods to do so, we are particularly interested in how participants narrate their own shifting senses of self in relation to the water related infrastructures and environments they inhabit, including other community members and the broader ecologies in which they are embedded. Niemanis’ work is central to the analytical approach we take in seeking to understand the individual as agent of change, and as a pivot of transformative relationships, while necessarily attending to broader socio-ecological, political, and infrastructural relationships. By highlighting PV processes in enabling new understandings and relationships to water and sanitation (in)access, we are also interested in drawing attention to ways that these inequalities influence one’s sense of self, or of others (cf. Morales, 2015), as well as the interest and capacity to take action to improve access or work towards change in different forms (cf. Latta and Wittman, 2012 and others working on themes of environmental citizenship, for instance).

Linked to changing understandings and senses of self, work across the humanities and social sciences has been increasingly attentive to the intersection of emotion and subjectivity, including for resource governance and access (e.g. Morales and Harris, 2014). Several scholars have demonstrated that decisions regarding resource use and management are often influenced by emotions, relationships, power dynamics, and shifting subjectivities (Wutich and Ragsdale, 2008; Wong and Sharp, 2009; Nightingale, 2011, 2013). Sultana (2011) and others (see Wutich, 2009; Goldin, 2010) argue that resource struggles are not just material struggles, but also emotional ones. Emotion, similar to the concept of subjectivity, is understood not as individualized, but rather as lived and experienced in embodied spaces, and in contextually specific ways (Woodward and Lea, 2010). Speaking to the contextual dimensions of emotions, it is important to recognize that emotions “may often be triggered in response to power structures, and are frequently experienced in relation to whether one violates or meets expectations related to social norms” (Morales and Harris, 2014; p. 706). Specific to natural resource management, the work of Wutich (2009) and Nightingale (2011) in particular demonstrate how community members’ shifting subjectivities according to contextual situations were predominantly experienced as shifting emotions – e.g., from those of pride and power to powerlessness and discomfort.

Avelar (2015) also speaks of the crucial aspect of emotions in water security and resource struggles with women in rural El Salvador, and the way they influence the outcomes of resource access and ultimately, shape the way critical resources are managed and experienced in everyday practices and survival struggles. As such, these authors call for greater attention to the ways that resources and emotions matter in everyday survival struggles, including access to water for basic needs. It is noteworthy that works along these lines draw on diverse methods, including interviews, surveys, life histories, and other approaches (often quite distinct from the methods and concepts associated with the discipline of psychology). In light of this, and particularly given the insight that emotions are not an individual phenomenon, but are linked to community and social dynamics (cf. Morales and Harris, 2014), there is interest in pushing methodological approaches on these concerns forward, including experimenting with alternative research methods, such as storytelling and art, to access and critically reflect on emotion and subjectivity. For instance, work by Mumby and Putnam (1992) found that as individuals share emotional experiences, their initial sense of anonymity gives way to feelings of community through the development of mutual affection, and coherence of purpose. How individuals narrate and navigate shifting emotions and senses of the self in a community context (subjectivity) is a key concern of the work presented here.

Subjectivity has been described as “one’s understanding of self and of what it means and feels like to exist within a specific place, time, or set of relationships” (Morales and Harris, 2014; p. 706). Furthermore, it may also reference one’s sense of identity (e.g. to feel as a woman) while recognizing that such connections are not fixed, nor uniform, and that

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7353807>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7353807>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)