THE *MIRATHO* RESEARCH PROJECT 2016-2021:

Photovoice as a methodology for decolonisation and epistemic justice

About this brief

This brief summarises key points on the value of participatory approaches in higher education research, with a particular focus on the use of photovoice as a narrative tool for decolonisation (Kessi, 2018) and epistemic justice in the South African higher education context. The recommendations made in this brief stem from reflections on a photovoice project that formed part of the larger longitudinal (2016-2020) Miratho research project which investigated the achieved higher education learning outcomes for young people who come from low-income households situated in rural and township areas in South Africa. The brief is addressed to university researchers and practitioners who are interested in promoting epistemic justice and decolonial knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing practices.

What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a visual participatory research approach that is based on the idea that photographs can be used as tools to stimulate dialogue and critical learning in order to explore solutions to challenges that oppressed groups of people are facing (Wang, 1999). As a methodology it is aimed at empowerment and social change, drawing on Paolo Freire's (1973) philosophy of education for critical consciousness by using photographs to foster critical analysis of social problems, and inspire collective action. It also draws on bell hooks' (1989:9) writing on the notion of 'voice' in which she argues that 'moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized,

the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible'. In addition, photovoice is symbolic of the turn from documentary photography (where photographs are seen as a reproduction of reality that yields unbiased evidence) to more reflexive approaches to photography that see the meaning of an image as constructed by both the photographer and the viewer (Mikhailovich, Pamphilon & Chambers, 2015).

Photovoice in practice

Our photovoice project was carried out between 2018 and 2019 with 19 student volunteers who were also life-history interviewees in the larger Miratho project. The students researched experiences of exclusion and inclusion at university, and how these experiences affected their learning outcomes – which we conceptualised as multidimensional capabilities and functionings. Students produced individual photo-stories and one collective photo-book titled: 'The Bitter Truth of Success'. The individual photo-stories came out of three four-day workshops in Free State, Lim-popo and Gauteng in which students received basic photography training, used River of Life[1] drawings to ref lect on their university experiences, and then produced storyboards on which they could base their photographs and narratives. They

[1]River of Life – a drawing of a river that is symbolic of one's life – including for example boulders or crocodiles to represent obstacles, or bridges and stepping stones to represent opportunities. The River of Live drawings allow participants to reflect on and be involved in telling their own stories, in their own way, and in hearing about the lives of others.

took their own photographs, curated, captioned, and titled them, and presented their individual stories at the workshops and at a public exhibition. The stories had titles like 'My Journey of Thorns and Roses' and 'Thriving Through Tough Times' or photo captions like 'Munwe muthihi a u tusi mathuthu' (a Tshivenda proverb meaning 'One finger cannot pick up a maize kernel' - signifying the importance of collaborative effort to ensure success). In this way photovoice enabled students to demonstrate what Yosso (2005) refers to as linguistic capital; evident in their bi-or multilingualism, use of alliteration, similes, metaphors or African proverbs in titles of their photo-stories, or the captions for each photo. It also highlighted their narrative capital (Watts, 2008) evident in their ability to critically reflect on their life experiences and use this reflection to construct striking visual stories. Photovoice enabled the telling of stories using images that students captured, gave meaning to, and interpreted, thus helping us to recognise them as contributors to knowledge in their own right (and not just as research subjects). Traditional ways of conducting research in higher education e.g. through interviews, questionnaires, can mask this recognition, because they carry the residual cultural presence of colonisation (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). That is, they tend to be extractive and maintain top-down, expert vs lay person or researcher vs research subject dichotomies that mirror power inequalities that are inherent in colonial processes (Mathebula, 2019).

The decolonial potential of photovoice

Disrupting power asymmetries through participatory research approaches like photovoice is symbolic of what Walter Mignolo refers to as delinking from coloniality (Mignolo, 2007) because it allows for more equal participation in the creation of knowledge between those who have power (researchers) and those who have less of it (research participants). Addressing such power differentials has distinctively decolonial value in the South African higher education context because knowledge and social relations are typically produced in ways that silence marginal identities and voices (Behari-Leak and Mokou, 2019). This means that knowledge production through and within institu-tions like universities can reinforce inequalities that linger in wider society due to coloniality and the legacies of apartheid. Participatory processes like photovoice can help dissociate from coloniality because they seek to flatten hierarchies of power, and highlight the importance of plurality, multiplicity, and difference in creating and sharing knowledge (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Because photovoice encourages the acknowledgement and appreciation of the voices, interpretive lenses and worldviews of marginalised people, it has decolonial attitude (Du Bois, 1999) and a helpful disposition for striving towards epistemic justice.

2019, photo by Melissa Lucas

How photovoice can promote epistemic justice

When they enter universities, low-income students who went to poorly resourced schools that are located in townships or rural areas may have lower English language proficiency or academic literacy than their wealthier middle class counterparts –who are likely to have gone to well-resourced urban schools. For this reason, rural and township students can be mis-recognised as inarticulate and/or unintelligent and therefore treated as outcasts of the public economy of knowledge. This means that they are vulnerable to being victims of epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice refers to unequal participation in knowledge-making processes due to misdistribution of educational opportunities and communicative or interpretive tools, but also unfair treatment in knowledge-sharing processes due to prejudice (Fricker, 2015). Photovoice encourages researchers to work with people who due to prejudice and unfair discrimination are typically excluded from contributing to knowledge. It supports the articulation of ideas, experiences, epistemologies and ontological positions, through languages and forms of expression that marginalised groups use and value. Through our photovoice process, students who might otherwise be stereotyped as inarticulate, publicly displayed and told with confidence their stories of inclusion and exclusion at university. This allowed them to recognise themselves and each other, and to be seen by the others, as valuable knowers and tellers. As such, the photovoice project helped us promote epistemic justice in three ways. First, it helped us move towards a fair way of deciding who gets to make epistemic contributions - no student was hindered from being a co-researcher due to negative assumptions about their intelligence or ability to articulate themselves in English. Second, it allowed us to operationalise students' right to research by having them work with us as co-researchers; the research process centred on the students' points of view and their interpretation of their lived experiences. Third, it made us move towards an inclusive way of sharing knowledge by incorporating diverse modes of expression for the students to use in telling their stories, and allowing them to speak and be heard at a public exhibition.

2019, photo by Melissa Lucas

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What can researchers do to promote epistemic justice?

Unequal epistemic participation occurs when factors such as race and/or socio-economic class, to the detriment or silencing of those who already suffer because of structural inequalities, skews knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing processes. We might then consider unequal epistemic participation during fieldwork (or in lecture halls) as a key mode in which unequal relationships and statuses within the higher education system tend to manifest.

There are three things that researchers can do to promote epistemic justice:

1. *Identify the things that get in the way of equal and reciprocal contributions to shared pools of knowledge –these are likely point to wider structures of inequality but also one's own assumptions that fuel negative stereotypes about and prejudice towards research participants.*
2. *Use research approaches and methodologies that can enable participants' narrative capability – the freedom to tell their story, have it acknowedged, and to learn from the stories others tell.*
3. *Work with research participants who are typically excluded from contributing to knowledge in your field, and aim for equal contributions from researcher/s and participant/s in the creation, analysis or sharing of data. This encourages mutual recognition as valuable members of a public economy of knowledge.*

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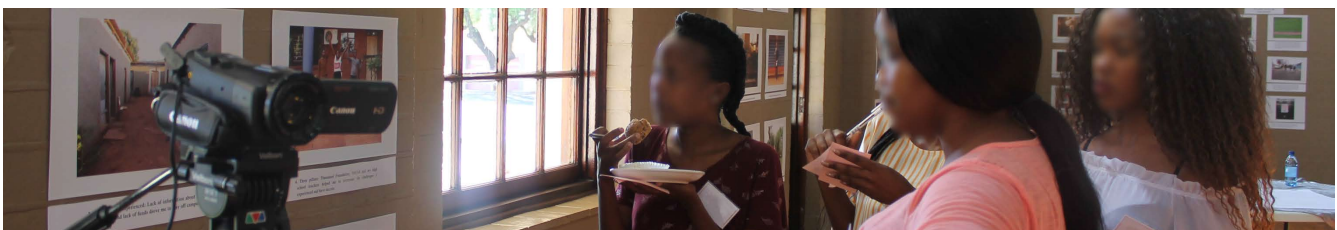
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