

Fostering narrative capabilities for epistemic justice: reflections on a photovoice project

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About the project

- **Miratho** is a longitudinal (2016-2020) mixed-methods project
- **Team:** Melanie Walker (UFS), Patience Mukwambo (UFS), Monica McLean (Nottingham), Ann-Marie Bathmaker (Birmingham), with Carmen Martinez-Vargas (UFS) and Thusanani Foundation (youth-led NGO).
- 65 students from rural and township areas in South Africa (five diverse universities).
- Focus on students from low income backgrounds - who has wealth and power in our society and who has wealth and power in our higher education system.
- Low income students' struggles and achievements point to some of the things that need to change for universities to be more inclusive.

About this presentation

- In this presentation, we critically reflect on the value of photovoice, using the capability approach as a lens through which to perceive this value.
- In our reflections, we draw from students' individual evaluations of the photovoice process.

About photovoice

- **Photovoice as a research instrument:** (see Wang & Burris, 1997): a) education for critical consciousness (Freire, 1973); b) feminism and notions of 'voice' (e.g. hooks, 1981); and c) participatory documentary photography (e.g. Hubbard, 1994).
- **Process:** Participants are given cameras and asked to document various aspects of their lived experiences through photographs. Images are then used to elicit analytic discussions during focus groups or interviews; participants narrate the personal significance of the images. Projects typically conclude with an exhibition, where findings could/should reach policy makers (Latz, et al. 2016).
- **Value:** Asking participants to create visuals in addition to spoken responses to interview questions creates a layer of richness within the data not possible through words alone; photographs can generate visceral responses from consumers of the project's findings - which is important for connecting with policy makers (Wang & Burris, 1997; Latz, et al. 2016).

Our photovoice process

- **Day 1:** About photovoice; River of Life drawings; camera training.
- **Day 2:** Reflections on experiences of exclusion and inclusion; developing storyboards; taking photographs.
- **Day 3:** Taking photographs; reflecting on the photographs; curating and captioning photo-stories.
- **Day 4:** Collective data analysis; individual reflections on the photovoice process; photovoice exhibition.

Students' reflections about photovoice

- *“I felt **part of something big and life changing**. Being able to **share my life story** with someone to help them have it better than I did. To be able to **share my events** in order to change how the education structure should work is extremely **profound** than I could ever express”*

- Dumisani
- *“I felt motivated by **sharing my stories** with different students from different varsity so I felt **welcomed** cause we **share the common struggle**. I always thought maybe its us from Country University who struggle at varsity”.*

- Tintswalo
- *“I felt belonging (inclusion). **Connected and free to express my feelings**. Inspired, motivated and encouraged to reach my goals. Responsible for my actions. **Appreciative, hopeful, purposeful and grateful**”.*

- Anathi
- *I felt overwhelmed, I felt **connection between/around the team**, teamwork. I felt **intrigued by other students' thinking capacity** and how they went (?) around with the project. And honestly, am also **grateful for the opportunity**.”*

- Mthunzi

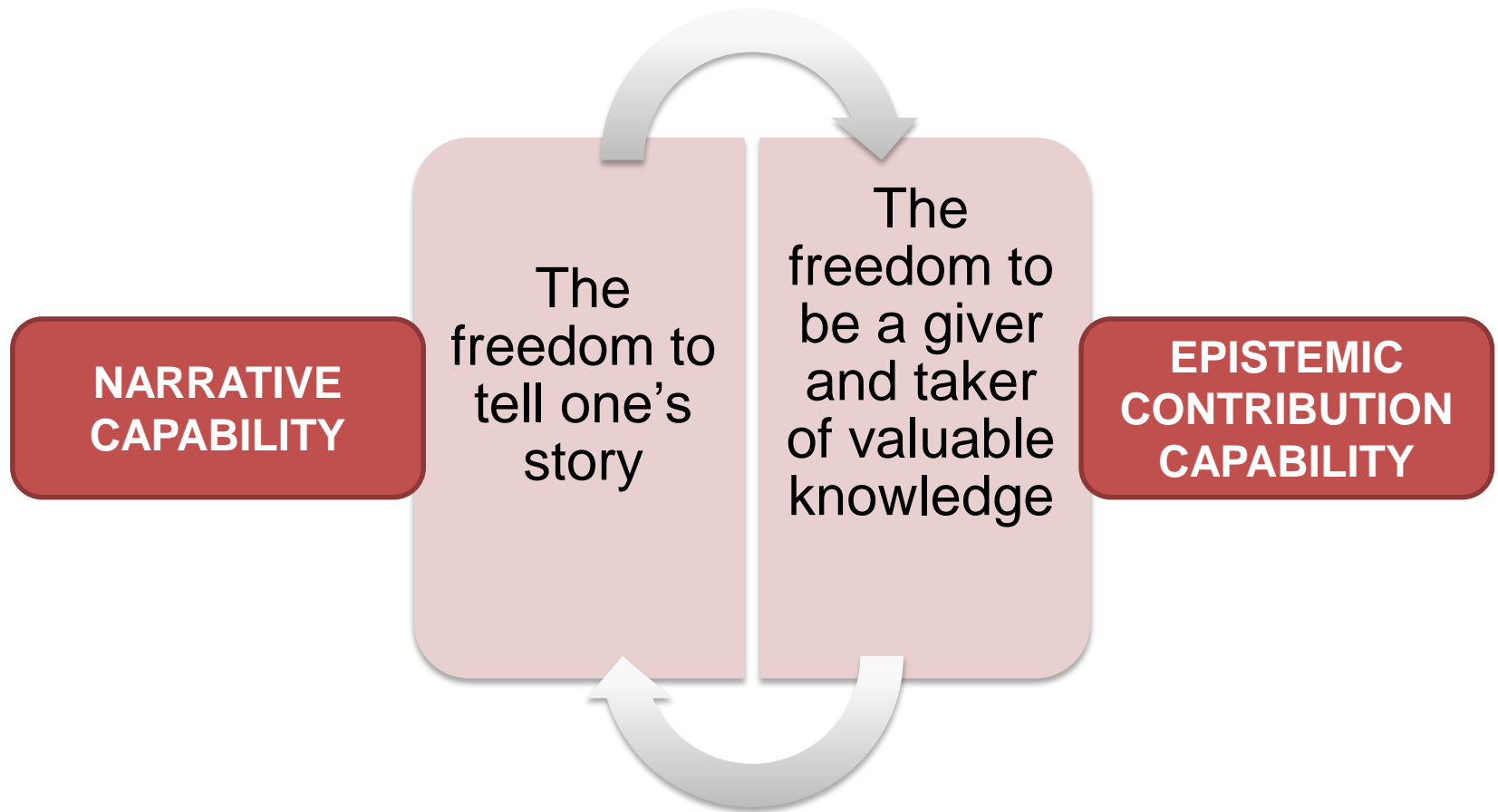
Students' reflections about photovoice

- “ I learned about the learning/ poor learning **environment in other schools/varsities which hinders learning**. Also, I learned the importance of sharing your experiences with others coz you find something to relate to from their experiences too”
- Busisiwe
- “Participating helped to **think of ideas** that can help other people who are coming to university for the first time. The first people to come to university from home”.
- Rimisa
- “I learned one should **own his/her truth** and not let it weigh him/her down [...] I **felt heard**. –**Safe** which led to being able to narrate my story without fear. –**That I was not alone**”.
- Bongeka

The Capability Approach

- Approach encourages the assessment of development in terms of valued freedoms for individuals.
- As an evaluative framework it is helpful for identifying and interrogating factors that enhance or constrain freedoms.
- Open-ended idea of social justice.

Understanding students' reflections through a capabilities lens



Reflections

- The power to tell stories can be rendered meaningless, in the absence of ‘narrative capability’, or the real opportunities individuals have to tell their stories, particularly if a necessary condition of this capability is the freedom to be listened to (Watts, 2008).
- It is the participatory and inclusive nature of the storytelling process that was enabled through photovoice that made students’ stories effective for sharing social knowledge, because we as researchers, as listeners, came to participate in the construction of the story.
- In the same way that parables and other genres of stories are used to convey a particular lesson or moral, stories about our lives convey meaning or hidden messages from which we learn.
- The capability for epistemic contribution is about having the internal ability and effective opportunity to formulate and share beliefs about the world, including the interpretation of one’s social world, without having these ideas, thoughts, beliefs rejected on the grounds of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2015).
- Epistemic contributions are made when we tell our life stories and have them listened to; we add to and take from common pools of knowledge, and exchange epistemic materials - materials that can be used to enable understanding, empathy, practical reason and public deliberation.
- By telling their stories, students gave to and took away from a shared pool of knowledge about poverty and about how coming from low-income households in rural and township areas affects one’s opportunities and achievements at university, but also what actions we can all take to enhance their freedom to flourish.
- They were positioned as the experts on this because of their experiences; their lives.

Conclusions

- In our analysis of students' evaluation of the photovoice process, we looked for evidence of valued freedoms, and came to the conclusion that narrative and epistemic contribution capabilities were enhanced; and that both capabilities are intertwined and foundational to more epistemic justice.
- Participatory practices ought to contribute to individuals' valued freedoms and be analysed and evaluated through this theoretical lens.
- Evaluating our photovoice project through a capabilities lens illuminated valued freedoms that may have gone unrecognised, had we used assessment criteria based on photovoice principles alone. These criteria usually ask us to look for evidence of social change or empowerment.
- But, in the context of higher education, can we talk about empowerment without talking about the freedom to learn, know and tell? Can we talk about empowerment in the absence of the freedom to be recognised as a credible testifier and trusted knower?
- Can we talk about empowerment in the absence of the freedom to act in order to dismantle (albeit incrementally) structural inequalities that limit these valued freedoms?



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