

TROUBLING THE NATIONAL BRAND AND VOICING HIDDEN HISTORIES

AN AHRC GLOBAL CHALLENGES RESEARCH FUND PROJECT



Members of Budhan Theatre on the set of 'Who Am I, Mom?'

KEY LEARNING: A SUMMARY



Voicing Hidden Histories core team members at Leeds International Film Festival

PARTNERS

FUNDER



PROJECT LEAD



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

PARTNERS



PROJECT TEAM

Principal Investigator

Prof. Paul Cooke, University of Leeds

Co-Investigators

Prof. Stephanie Dennison, University of Leeds

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Report Author

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Brazil

Prof. Gilberto Sobrinho, Universidade da Campinas

Viviana Santiago, Plan Brasil

Anselmo Costa and all the Plan Brasil Codó office team

All young women of the Brazil group

India

Dakxin Bajrange, Abhishek Indrekar, and Atish Indrekar

And all members of Budhan Theatre

South Africa

Martin Keat, Bishop Simeon Trust

Sinethemba Makanya, THEMBA Interactive

All the young people at the Safe Parks

PROJECT OVERVIEW

"Troubling the National Brand and Voicing Hidden Histories: Historical Drama as a Tool for International Development and Community Empowerment" was an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project led by The University of Leeds (UoL), and funded as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). The project, which spans from January 2017 - February 2018, was led by Prof. Paul Cooke. Its Co-Investigators are Prof. Stephanie Dennison and Prof. William Gould. All three researchers are part of UoL's Centre for World Cinema and Digital Cultures.

The aim of this pilot project was to support specific marginalised communities in Brazil, India and South Africa to challenge the way these nations present themselves to the world via 'nation branding' and other 'soft power' initiatives. In particular we were focussed on the ways in which these countries shape the national historical narrative and to explore how, or indeed, if, these communities saw themselves reflected in it. In so doing, the project sought to raise awareness nationally and internationally of these communities' precarious place in society and to support them in campaigning to effect change in their lives.

In November 2017, the lead researchers and facilitators on each strand of the project met to share their experiences and learning from the project thus far. The focus of the evaluation was on the community-led filmmaking projects which formed the central part of the practical portion of the project. The session was focused around six key questions:

- What is it about the participatory creative process that makes it a powerful tool for change? Does it work?
- What are the challenges that practitioners face when delivering such projects?
- How are decisions made in participatory arts projects? How do we decide which stories to tell?
- How is advocacy created? What needs to be in place? What are the challenges? How does the participation element change in this phase?
- How does the presence of a researcher (and research institute) influence the process, delivery and/or outcomes? What are the positives and negatives of involving researchers and research institutes directly in development activities?
- Does the participatory creative process support people to feel empowered to challenge national narratives that do not represent them? Is this a priority for them?



Brazili participants photograph and share each other's artwork



Project members film at a Johannesburg Safe Park



Members of a
Johannesburg Safe Park

Recording the

"We started out with a sense of direction, of where we wanted to head, and then at points we made it up as we went along, in a way that seemed consistent with our experience and our feeling at that point, but in response to the people that the project was working with as well."

Martin Keat
Bishop Simeon Trust
South Africa strand

PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS REQUIRE FLEXIBILITY

It soon became clear that each strand of the project had shifted substantially from the original aims of the project activities. This was in part shaped by the level of experience with participatory arts. In India, where Prof. Gould has been working with Budhan Theatre for several years, and where Budhan Theatre have been creating similar work for over 20 years, there was already a refined focus and proven methodology in place, and so changes to the project approach were minimal. Gould does note, however, that the notion of what 'success' was in the project team changed as the project developed. In Brazil, where this was the first time that Prof. Dennison, Prof. Sobrinho and Plan Brasil had worked together, both the focus of the filmmaking project and the approach used changed substantially over the course of the project, shifting from a central focus on a class and race narrative, to one of gender and adolescence.

As Keat suggests above, however, it was agreed by all partners that this process of change was also inherent to and necessary for successful participatory approaches to build authentic foundations for empowerment and advocacy. In a participatory project, the process itself has to be challenged, informed and owned by all participants and stakeholders in order for it to be authentic, and this cannot happen until the mechanics which allow for such reflection and discussion to take place - the participatory process itself - are set in motion. This does not mean that each new participatory project should be treated as a 'pilot'. Rather, this process of discovery is part of a wider participatory methodology. Partners felt it important that funders were aware of this, in the hope that this might encourage a more flexible approach to such activities, which in turn might allow projects to adopt a longer-term approach to their work, and thus support sustainability.

"For me, the interesting thing has been learning about the process [...] in terms of the research, that's what I've got the most out of."

Prof. Paul Cooke
University of Leeds
South Africa strand



Abhishek Indrekar, Co-Director of
'Who Am I, Mom?' on set

PRACTICE-RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS BRING LEARNING TO BOTH SIDES

The cross-sector relationships between academics, artists and NGOs can not only have impact on the specific project being developed, but can, and should, be used to support reflection on the wider practice of all involved. In Brazil, Prof. Dennison's work in the northern region of Codó has prompted her to spend more time working in Northern Brazil, and to dwell further on questions of gender. Meanwhile, Plan Brasil's Viviana Santiago felt the project had allowed her to think about new ways to articulate the empowered narrative of the girls within Plan's wider advocacy tools.

We agreed that this shared learning was most fruitful once all partners had a clear sense of what they brought to the table, and how each complemented the other. There was a tendency at the beginning of some of the strands for people to feel that they had to 'be'

everything - a researcher, an artist, an advocate, a practitioner. As these projects progressed, we realised that it was not about every team member behaving in the same way, but agreeing on a shared set of values and approaches that allowed members to bring their own expertise in at different times.

This process also required frank conversations regarding what an academic partner could bring to pre-existing programmes of work, besides from simply functioning as another way to 'ride the funding wave'. Generally, it was felt that the project had encouraged critical reflection by all partners which might not have been possible with work more directly funded by the development sector, which imposes stricter outputs or targets; it gave practitioners more space to reflect on their work, to take a step back from the day-to-day and to think about their work at a more abstract level.



"Anyone can film during this era of the digital domain, but [...] some can also be filmmakers. So, this idea of the democratisation of the media by the digital means anyone can film. This is the very idea of participatory arts".

Prof. Gilberto Sobrinho
Universidade da Campinas
Brazil strand

PARTICIPANTS AS ARTISTS

In each project, the relationship of the participants to the creative outputs they were creating was different. In India, where the participants were already part of an artists' collective (Budhan Theatre) they already considered themselves artists (theatre actors, directors, producers), and the project provided them with another skill - filmmaking - to add to their palette. The way in which the group worked reflected this, working very collaboratively on the creative content with several producers and directors working across the project simultaneously.

In Brazil, where the girls had limited exposure to formal arts activity, considerable time was spent encouraging them to recognise their own pre-existing creative and artistic skills (eg. as part of traditional dance troupes) before introducing them to a more formalised training which not only included practical training in terms of the filmmaking process, but also a

series of critical thinking sessions which encouraged them to engage with media more critically. In South Africa, where the participants were generally of a younger age, the artistic process was interpreted both as a skills-building process but also as a period of creative play, a safe space in which participants could step away from their daily struggles.

In each setting, the importance of valuing participants as artists in their own right - taking the time to understand their existing experiences and talents and tailoring training and delivery to facilitate their own development - was key. If, in a participatory process, participants remain simply that, 'participants', then they cannot transcend the hierarchies that inevitably shape any workshop scenario and we risk losing some of the creative identity that helps shape their experiences and outcomes. In training participants as fellow artists, we can deliver this work with integrity.

"There was a lot of stop and go, pause and reflect. I had to remember to breathe most times as the different instruments came together to play a single piece [...] But I also found that for the participants that we were working with [...] it actually became about having a breathing space for them, within the workshops that we were doing".

Still from the film 'The Journey of My Life', produced & directed by: Youth Committee of Leth'iThemba Safe Park



Sinethemba Makanya
Themba Interactive
South Africa strand

BREATHING SPACES...

Whilst none of the projects set out with a specifically therapeutic aim for the arts practice engaged (with a focus more on empowerment, awareness raising and leadership), it was clear that for many participants the arts - both within and outside this project - were a source of refuge. Building a safe and supportive environment is important in any responsible arts initiative with vulnerable people, and all partners had experience of creating such spaces. However, ensuring the original topics of the projects left enough room for young people to enjoy the arts in this way was a key lesson learned. This was especially prevalent in South Africa, the strand which worked with the youngest participants and many of the most vulnerable. As Makanya outlines above, although the films created remained topic-based and the children engaged well with this, as the project developed it became clear that more than exploring the issues, which they experienced on a daily basis, the artistic

process, including the non-film activities such as dance and song activities, allowed them a space in which to discuss these issues but also to escape them:

"Life in South Africa is inherently political, and I think the young people are aware of the fact that the way they are [is] because of apartheid and what was done, but we don't really want to be talking about that because I go back home and I know that. So, I think more of the dancing was, you know what, actually let's just enjoy ourselves, let's be children, let's use our art to breathe".

We were careful, however, to avoid the art becoming a direct form of 'therapy'. Our focus was on creating a 'breathing space', rather than seeking to directly explore or engage with participants' personal traumas. Participatory arts can be valuable tools in this kind of work, but only if used within a carefully controlled environment and by trained practitioners.



Viviana Santiago and participants at Plan Brasil getting to know each-other through a drawing workshop

...AND MIXED METHODS

Just as music and theatre were used in South Africa and India (in both cases, the delivery partners were theatre organisations and, as fictional films, the theatre approaches also helped train the participants to 'act'), the use of non-film techniques to build a safe space and an environment of trust were also key in Brazil, where the first two days of creative workshops used music, theatre and visual arts to focus on teambuilding, storytelling and creative play. This was noted as key to the filming process that followed, as it ensured the group had together created a trusting and open environment, as well as allowing practitioners to identify any key vulnerabilities or safeguarding issues that might need to be considered in the filming process. Crucially, this mixed methods approach allowed participants to explore not just their histories, but also their presents and their futures, both real and imagined. It allowed us to identify with participants

beyond the historical narrative in which we had first encountered them and - as noted above - to shape the participatory process based on their complex identities. In Brazil this was as Afro-Brazilians, but also as women, as teenagers, as artists, as students and as friends.

We also agreed that it was important that safe spaces and breathing spaces are created for the practitioners delivering the work who often, through their art, become containers for the stories and experiences of the group they are working with. Ensuring that practitioners (across all sectors) have a structure of support around them is therefore crucial both for the practitioners' wellbeing but also, in turn, for the sustainability of a project. This is something that development organisations commissioning artists or practitioners should bear in mind.



Directors and cast members on the set up of Budhan Theatre's 'Who Am I, Mom?'

"In a way you can't escape the relationship between the high historical narrative and the [...] contemporary realities in what we did. It was inherent."

Prof. William Gould
University of Leeds
India strand

BALANCING HISTORY, EXPERIENCE AND ASPIRATIONS

It is perhaps not surprising that given the above experiences, the practical projects largely moved away from delivering a direct response to identities represented in historical drama, favouring instead a focus on the participants' own relationships with their histories, their experiences of the present and their aspirations for the future.

The India strand engaged most directly with historical narratives, as this was a central part of Budhan Theatre's work (and their longstanding relationship with UoL) in raising awareness of the plight of Denotified Tribes (DNTs), as Gould's quote above demonstrates. Their first fictional film tells the history of the Chhara community through the experience of a young girl in the present-day, providing a way of examining the past to reimagine the future. Their second film explains the persecution of Chhara artists, from the 1800s to the present day.

In Brazil, whilst a portion of the pre-filming workshops spoke directly about the representation of minority Brazilian communities on film, the produced film focused on the girls' presents and futures at a very personal level. Inspired by the films of Eduardo Coutinho, a Brazilian filmmaker known for celebrating the stories of 'everyday' people, we felt that the girls were able to validate and value their own stories, and anchor them within a wider myriad of narratives.

In South Africa, whilst explicitly exploring their history was not the group's primary focus, choosing instead to use their films as direct action tools for peer-to-peer advocacy and campaigning with local councils, the project team felt their history nevertheless shaped the whole creative process. As Keat says: "The films they've made aren't necessarily a response to the national narrative, but they are a reflection of that narrative".

"Some of the early films [in the series] were an exploration of this Observers' Paradox. About them producing what they thought we wanted them to produce."

Martin Keat
Bishop Simeon Trust
South Africa strand

Camera workshop at Leth'iThemba
Safe Park, Johannesburg



THE OBSERVERS' PARADOX

The Observers' Paradox is originally a sociolinguistic term, coined by William Labov to explain the paradox that exists in trying to record natural, everyday speech through the act of observation, where the presence of the observer inherently affects the way the subjects behave.

Translated to the participatory and socially-engaged arts environment, the risk of generating a similar Observers' Paradox - where the participants change their behaviour or choices based on what they believe the workshops' practitioners are expecting - was acknowledged. This was prevalent in South Africa, for example, where small groups developed short films that were aimed at raising awareness about an issue which affected their everyday lives and in which they wanted to see change. At the onset, the participants' choices appeared to reflect existing, well-known

narratives rather than their own. The causes for this may be numerous: the simple presence of observers in the room; the saturation of development agencies working with the group; the original direction of the funding project (challenging xenophobia) which later widened to explore human rights issues more generally. Keat also notes, however, that this tendency may have been a key part of the participants' development in terms of understanding their own personal response to the narratives surrounding them: "in a way I think it was also [...] them exploring what the narrative is from their perspective, the narrative that they receive about themselves, but [which isn't] necessarily their own". Having the chance to inhabit those narratives, and then reflect on whether or not they are a true representation of self, allowed for significant development. Taking sufficient time to explore narratives in these different ways also helped contribute to the project's development of a safer and more open space of trust.

Other ways to lessen the impact of the Observers' Paradox included: working with existing community-based groups (eg. In India, Budhan Theatre, who made up the participants and practitioners, live together communally and so their practice is part of their everyday life together); direct participation by practitioners in activities so as to breakdown the observer/participant distinction (eg. in Brazil, practitioners drew life trees and aspirational poems alongside the participants, helping to create a more open and equal experience, but during issue-based activities left voice to the participants); framing the activities as arts-based workshops rather than making them purely issues-based to encourage open exploration.

It was nevertheless agreed that the role of 'researcher as observer' remained crucial to reaching a deeper

understanding of this work. The recommendation was that the researcher should be there to generate a 'stimulus', but they must be aware of when to step away and observe the process from a distance. Taking the time for the researchers to build relationships both with the practitioners and the participants was key, another lesson pointing to the importance of adequate time for project planning and delivery, and sustainability longer-term.

Drone footage still of Codó, Maranhão filmed by participants



"It's not about some poor girls. It's not this message. It's about a group of human beings who decide to share with the entire world [their] ambitions. [...] And when they talk about wishes and dreams and about what they want to be, what they want to have, I think they are making it clear that everything is about how they can access their rights and have the full development of their abilities and potential. It's about decision makers [...] and how we can change [their] perception".



Brazil participants - those starring in 'Um Pouco de Tudo, Talvez'

Viviana Santiago
Plan International Brasil
Brazil strand

TRANSLATING TYPES OF ADVOCACY

Advocacy, and the advocacy goals for the materials created, varied across the three strands, and through each strand's development. The participants were keen to advocate at a local level, especially to friends and family, and this was felt to be powerful both for their own development and the creation of wider peer networks that might eventually lead to community mobilisation. It was acknowledged, though, that for real change to be effected, the outputs had to be relevant and accessible to decision makers and external audiences, too. The challenge sometimes was achieving a balance within the films that satisfied both needs.

As Makanya notes, in South Africa "[the advocacy] was very much defined by the participants that we were working with, because we asked 'well, what is important to you, what do you want our event to be about?'" This approach resulted in a range of community-focused events, where the young people introduced the films and led discussions with a peer-based audience.

These videos were also shared with policy makers, online via the Bishop Simeon Trust and CWCDC, and at UK academic conferences. In the latter the video's issue-based narrative was challenged somewhat by audiences, some of whom felt that the films reflected well known stories about these 'types' of communities. They were sometimes more 'moved' by 'b-roll footage' generated by the project that offered more positive images of the young people involved laughing and having fun together. Negotiating a balance between raising awareness of the issues without positioning the participants as victims was crucial to creating positively empowering materials, and the careful curation of the films was frequently necessary.

As Dennison noted, the advantage of conducting such work within an academic context is that the films are one of many outputs, including position papers and peer-reviewed research. These help to critically position learning in different spheres. In India, for example, their previous films have been attached to national policy papers.



A Youth Leader at Repheleng Safe Park, is interviewed as part of the final project film.

"We're right to do what we're doing, but we need to be mindful of the risk that we're creating for the people we're supporting to do it - that's complicated".

Martin Keat
Bishop Simeon Trust
South Africa strand

POWER RELATIONS EXIST AT EVERY LEVEL

As a group we discussed the differing power relations which became apparent, both within the participant groups and through the participatory process itself, both of which we acknowledged were unavoidable. Part of the participatory process itself is acknowledging and understanding what power each stakeholder brings to the activity, and how to lessen the subsequent imbalances which may present themselves. We discussed the inevitable power of the facilitator and the group's perception of them, whether having come from a different space or not, as being 'different' (whether in expertise, status or background). Similarly, the researchers' power, and the question of how much they should take part in the decision making was explored. Part of this responsibility to lessen the negative impacts of such imbalances included managing participant expectations (where in Brazil, for example, the participants first thought they were going to be film stars). At the same time, we

noted the value that the participants attached to working with an 'expert', and the validation this provided to their work. We also discussed the traditional hierarchical nature of film-making itself, how this affected the decision-making process and different ways that this was overcome.

The projects also highlighted, as expected, wider cultural power relations. In India - a topic perhaps underlined by the gender focus of the Brazil strand - the group noted the majority of male participants in the group and the difficulty of getting women involved. As it happened, the Indian fictional film went on to focus on a female lead, which the team were proud of. The participatory process also helped us to think more about the intersectionality of the participants we were working with, and how this was portrayed in the films (e.g. in Brazil the original focus participants was on the girls' identity as Afro-Brazilian, but it soon became

clear that the film was also about other aspects of their identity, including faith, gender, age and education, and also simply about teenage girls coming of age).

The person-focused values of the participatory process also allowed us to understand the relative power that some participants had in relation to others, both within and outside the group. In South Africa, for example, where the participants in the Repaleng workshops came from two different backgrounds (one was a pre-formed Church group with greater relative privilege), care had to be taken to ensure the participants weren't going to 'produce something which they thought was the experience of the other group of young people, which wasn't necessarily their own" (Martin Keat).

Finally, we also acknowledged the importance of carrying through this awareness and inclusive participatory approach into and across the project teams in these types of projects. Ensuring, for example, that those team-members for whom English is not their first language have adequate support and space to be able to express themselves at an equal level to the UK team is important. For the UK team, acknowledging our own position and the wider issues surrounding 'development' work within a postcolonial context was key, and we found that respecting and taking the time to understand the respective knowledge and experience of all partners, whether practice or research based, was central to the success of each project strand.



Repheleng Safe Park participants share their films with their peers and local community as part of a co-designed celebration and awareness-raising event.



Budhan Theatre's crew members on set.

"[Our work is sustainable because] it's a penniless opera [...] you know, no money in the world at all, and, it's my personal opinion, but I don't feel that you need money at all to make the films or do theatre. In the digital age, you can create, you can capture your content, in a digital age, you can reach as many people as you want."

Dakxin Bajrange
Budhan Theatre
India strand

SUSTAINABILITY

Central to all of our discussions was the importance of sustainability, both in the duration of the activities but also, and equally important, in the support offered to participants after the core activities cease. If we are to understand participatory arts practices as catalysts for greater change, and are to share this expectation with our participants, then it is important that we ensure this development - which, like any education or new skill, takes time to develop - is nurtured in the longer-term. This is far from a new concept to participatory arts or development projects, and continues to be a major obstacle to creating significant change. The impact of having a sustainable model for creative development was highlighted in this project by the three very different stages that each partnership and delivering organisation were at. In Brazil, Plan have invested a lot in supporting girls empowerment in the Maranhao region, but this was the first time that most of the participants had worked together, and the first

time the staff team had been engaged in participatory arts. In South Africa, Themba Interactive had already built strong relationships with the community groups, but the main facilitators were relatively new to the groups (1 year). In India, meanwhile, the group has been working and living together as an artistic-activist collective for over 20 years, with young participants growing up alongside their main facilitator.

Whilst Bajrange's quotation above is by no means intended to suggest that such work would not benefit from additional financial support, it forces us to consider the effects - positive and negative - that such funding, particularly for short-term projects with specific output requirements, can have on long-term grassroots movements. Sustainability is not just therefore about ensuring a steady stream of income, but about creating a sustainable environment in which communities feel empowered to grow.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

SHORT-TERM IMPACT & SUCCESSES

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Academics

VHH is informing wider teaching practice in the University. Eg. Prof. Dennison is now looking to include more content on gender and rural areas of Brazil in her teaching.

Practitioners

VHH is encouraging practitioners to reflect on representation of their participants. Eg. Plan Brasil are considering new ways to articulate the girls' empowered narrative within their wider advocacy tools.

Participants

VHH is having a notable effect on some participants wider wellbeing. Eg. In South Africa, one young male participant who at the beginning was very timid became one of the most active and engaged in the group.

RESOURCES & INFRASTRUCTURE

Funding

The South Africa strand has received HEFCE funding to further develop the leadership programme. Brazil and India are also both preparing follow-on funding bids.

Land

Bonisiwe Safe Park used their video presentation to lobby for more land for their Safe Park and were granted new land by the local government.

Reach

All main project films were premiered at Leeds International Film Festival 2017, allowing the participants' work to reach a global audience.

POLICY CHANGE

Lobbying Tools

The National Association of Child Care Workers in South Africa wish to use the films as part of their lobbying materials to ensure the Safe Park programme is extended for another 5 years.

Reporting Tools

In India, Budhan Theatre's films, alongside Prof. Gould's research, have been included in the National DNT Commission's policy reports. This is the first time audiovisual materials have been included in these policy reports.



Inés Soria-Donlan, Plan Brasil staff and participants review and discuss each other's 'My Life' trees.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

WATCH THE FILMS

Visit the Centre for World Cinemas & Digital Cultures YouTube channel: <https://bit.ly/2JDqbeU>

FIND OUT MORE

Visit the project's Yarn pages to learn more about the project process: <https://yarncommunity.org/projects/25>

MORE RESOURCES

Discover more open-access resources about arts practice, research and international development at Changing the Story website <https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk>

VISIT OUR PARTNERS

Visit our partners' websites to find out more about their work:

University of Leeds CWDC

https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125052/centre_for_world_cinemas_and_digital_cultures

Plan Brasil <https://plan-international.org/brazil>

UNICAMP Instituto de Arte <http://www.iar.unicamp.br/>

Grupo Pindorama <https://www.grupopindorama.com/>

THEMBA Interactive <http://www.themba.org.za/>

Bishop Simeon Trust <http://www.bstrust.org/>

Budhan Theatre <http://www.budhantheatre.org/>

Camera workshop at Leth'iThemba Safe Park, Johannesburg



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