



# CHANGING THE STORY

## Taking the *Product* Seriously: Questions of Voice, Politics and Aesthetics in Participatory Video

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## Chapter Twelve

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#### Introduction

In this chapter we wish to reflect upon an arts-based development project that we have been working on in South Africa since 2016, and in particular its use of ‘Participatory Video’ (PV). This project has developed out of a partnership between the University of Leeds Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures and two NGOs — the Bishop Simeon Trust (BST) and Themba Interactive (TI) — that work with a number of ‘Isibindi Safe Parks’ (ISP) operating across Ekurhuleni Municipality on the outskirts of Johannesburg. ISPs are educational and feeding programmes which provide vulnerable children and young people with a warm meal and a safe space to do their homework and undertake recreational activities before and after school (UNICEF 2017). This is particularly important in communities where up to 30% of young people do not have enough to eat each day, where 12% of young people have lost both parents, only 19% of children live with both parents and where 25% of young girls are subjected to frequent sexual abuse (Stats SA 2018). ISPs provide young people with a stable, safe environment in which they can build their confidence.

In order for an ISP to be eligible to receive statutory state funding, and thus to ensure its sustainability, it must have a functioning youth committee that can help to steer its development. The aim of our project was to use PV to support the development of these youth committees, helping their end-users to cultivate the requisite leadership skills both to take on a role in this structure and to help them effect change more broadly in their own lives and the life of their communities. At the heart of this endeavour was the need to support the young people involved to find ways to have their voice not only heard but also listened to, an often challenging goal in a highly hierarchical society such as South Africa. This chapter offers an initial evaluation of our work to date, drawing on interviews we conducted with participants, qualitative project feedback questions and an evaluation event we held in Leeds in November 2017. All comments by children and young people involved have been anonymised, and the production teams involved in making the films have only been identified by their ISP. Our aim here is to explore, in particular, the ways in which the competing priorities of the various stakeholders involved in the project have had to negotiate our ethical commitment to the prioritisation of voice, a process that has forced us to fundamentally rethink our initial assumptions about the foundational principles of our project. Here we focus on the way that the project engages with a tradition of PV practice that goes back to at least the 1960s. As we shall discuss below, while such projects invariably make claims for PV as a particularly effective method for 'giving' communities 'voice', however patronising such a formulation might be (Bery 2003, pp.108), very little space is given to the exploration of the films produced in such projects, that is the specific articulation of this 'voice'. Thus,

we wish to challenge a trend in the analysis of such practice that focuses entirely on questions of methodology and an understanding of PV as a *process*, largely ignoring the *products* made. In so doing, we also wish to contextualise PV historically, highlighting how participatory film and video-making practices have long sought to expand the possibilities of cinematic language, informing numerous canonical film texts. Yet when the community *participants*, rather than community *facilitators* or professional filmmakers, control the means of production, the specific nature of the films made, and their approach to audio-visual communication tends to disappear from the discussion. Finally, we do return to the *process*, and provide some further reflections on the value of, and continuing challenges implicit within, our project and how we wish to see this project develop.

### **Defining Participatory Video**

PV is generally defined 'as a process [...]. It can serve as a powerful force for people to see themselves in relation to the community', in order 'to empower people to shape their own destiny' (White 2003, pp.64). The starting point for many contemporary PV projects is frequently traced to a community filmmaking project set up by the National Film Board of Canada in the mid 1960s to support the inhabitants of the Newfoundland island of Fogo in their efforts to avoid resettlement by the government (Crocker 2003). Filmmakers worked with the island's inhabitants to make films about their lives, the aim of which was, firstly, to raise awareness across the island of the shared nature of

the inhabitants' plight. Central to what became known as the 'Fogo Process' was collective critical self-reflection by the islanders of the images produced, which were generally either short pieces of Direct Cinema capturing everyday life or single-shot, individual interviews. These attempted to create what Colin Low, the main external filmmaker involved in the process, called 'vertical films', or films which presented non-hierarchical, inclusive images of life that avoided relativizing the voice of participants as, he argued, can happen in multi-voice — what he termed 'horizontal' — films, where one interviewee is contrasted, or indeed played off, against another (Crocker 2003, p.129). Through their production, and more importantly their collective consumption, of the films, participants claimed they gained in 'confidence [and] self-worth', developing a 'better self-image' that valued their local knowledge (Crocker 2003, p.130). Secondly, the 'Fogo Process' allowed this community, with its new collective sense of identity, to project itself externally in order to advocate for change with the government (Bell 2017). The Fogo Process was exported widely, and, as already noted, is frequently cited as the inspiration for many present-day projects (Crocker 2003, p.123; Corneil 2012; Walker and Arrighi, 2012, p.410). The *global* growth of PV can, however, be traced to a set of practices emerging in the 1960s around the world. In the UK, for example, the development of PV came as part of the wider community arts movement that emerged out of activist culture in the 1960s (Kelly 1984, pp.15-36), which was partially co-opted by the establishment, to a degree at least, under New Labour in the 1990s (Bishop 2012, p.38).

In terms of troubling many accounts of PV's genesis, more important for our chapter is the way in which it can be seen as part of a wider tradition within documentary filmmaking identified by Bill Nichols as the 'Participatory Mode' (Nichols 2001, pp.115-124). This is a trend which foregrounds the active participation of both the filmmaker and her/his subjects in the production of the film. Nichols, for example, points to Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer* 1961) — for which the term *cinéma vérité* was coined — as a key example of this trend. Seeming to prefigure the Fogo Process, the film, which presents a series of interviews between Morin and his acquaintances in Paris, ends with a staged discussion between the film's participants who, having watched the film's footage, debate its ability to capture what they perceived to be the reality of their experience. Thus, the film becomes a self-referential meditation on the ability of the medium to capture and communicate the profilmic (Dilorio 2007). Of course, if the role of critical reflection is to be seen as central to PV, it can be found in filmmaking practice since the beginning of the medium. Robert Flaherty, for example, would regularly screen his rushes to his subjects, asking their opinion on what he should film next for his presentation of their lives in *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film that has been widely criticised for its fabricated, nostalgic image of Inuit life (Zimmermann and Auyash 2015).

At around the same time as Rouch was experimenting with *cinéma vérité*, Latin America was experiencing an extraordinary growth in experimental and underground filmmaking that would come to be defined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino as 'Third Cinema' (1976), an approach to which the

question of participation was central. Solanas and Getino rejected 'First Cinema', which they define as the mainstream industry, and, in particular, Hollywood. Similarly, they spurned 'Second Cinema', which they identify primarily with European *auteur* filmmaking. Both these types of cinema they see as supporting the bourgeois status quo, even as those filmmakers who Solanas and Getino define as 'Second Cinema' frequently saw *themselves* as providing a necessary challenge to the bourgeois 'First Cinema' of Hollywood. Instead, Solanas and Getino call for a revolutionary mode of filmmaking practice, 'Third Cinema', which attempts to confront directly the colonial impulses of late capitalism in all its guises. The projector '*is a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second*', they declare (Solanas and Getino 1976, p.4, emphasis in original). Their most important film is *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968), a didactic essay film that creates a disruptive juxtaposition between found archival footage of police brutality, political slogans, still images and poetry with an understated voice-over commentary, strongly drawing on Eisenstein's notion of a 'Montage of Attractions' (Eisenstein 1986, p.230), in this case with the ultimate aim of generating a dialectical encounter between the images on screen and the audience. Thus, for Solanas and Getino, their understanding of participation in the filmmaking process is twofold. On the one hand, the material shown on screen is drawn directly from the everyday experience of the working classes. It is their oppression which has generated both the footage shown and Solanas and Getino's approach to the edit. On the other, through the active participation of the working classes in their underground screenings of the film, they sought to provoke their audience to revolution. Each individual screening of the film was

itself constructed as a moment with revolutionary potential. In makeshift underground cinemas across the region, and frequently under armed guard by revolutionary guerrillas, the film was shown as a provocation to the audience to engage in political debate, the film being paused regularly to allow discussion (Chanan 1997). Here we again find echoes of the Fogo Process. However, unlike the Fogo films, *La hora de los hornos* is seen as a canonical film text that would never be considered, as Shannon Walsh points out, as a form of PV (2016, p.409), even as Solanas and Getino themselves define their practice as an act of collective participation with the working-class masses: 'We thus discovered a new facet of cinema: the participation of people who, until then, were considered spectators.' (1976, p.62).

### **Using Participatory Video to Develop Youth Leadership**

Before turning to the films that have been produced during our work with the children and young people who use ISPs in Ekurhuleni, let us first outline the way our work has developed over the last two years, culminating in our involvement with the Voicing Hidden Histories project (as outlined in the introduction to this volume). BST/TI had used various PA practices before this project, most frequently 'Forum Theatre' (Boal 1979) and 'Grassroots Comics' (Sharma 2017). However, they had not previously used PV. We began our work together by holding a workshop where a group of 'Childcare Advocates' (CCAs) who support the services users in one ISP came together to discuss the image of South Africa that circulates on World Cinema Screens, how this reflects (or does not reflect) their everyday experience and the extent to which



the issues they saw in the films we discussed were the issues they wished to see on screen. During this workshop we explored how films from, and about, South Africa that one sees in the UK tend to fall into two groups: stories about apartheid, Mandela and the democratic transition on the one hand (e.g. *Invictus*, Clint Eastwood, 2009; *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, Justin Chadwick, 2013), and stories about contemporary societal violence or the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the other (e.g. *Yesterday*, Darrell Roodt, 2004; *Tsotsi*, Gavin Hood, 2005; *Jerusalema*, Ralph Ziman, 2008) (Cooke 2016). This discussion was then used to develop short comic strips in order to draw out the issues they were interested in focussing on in their films. Discussion of the comics ensued and these were then used to create screenplays, drawing on Forum Theatre techniques. The group workshopped the screenplays, producing a shooting script, which they then filmed and edited over the course of three days. The project culminated in a screening of the films to their local community.

As we shall discuss further below, feedback from the project was generally positive, with participants experiencing a confidence boost from being trusted with professional equipment and from their ability to raise issues that were important to them, issues which they felt are pervasive in their community but that are not widely enough discussed — most notably in this case gender-based violence (the subject of both the films the group decided to make). The main issue they raised, however, was the question of sustainability. Participants felt that they would not be able to replicate the project on their own without the equipment and support of the project facilitators. This led to a

second iteration of the project with the same CCAs, groups of young people who use the ISP aged between 6 and 14 and a group of student interns from the University of Leeds. Although we largely followed the same model as the first iteration — making comics and using Forum Theatre – we simplified the filmmaking process, with the aim of lowering the technical barriers and so making the PV process more accessible to this community without professional equipment. Thus, we used automatic ‘point and shoot’ cameras, such as one finds on a mobile phone, to shoot a series of silent images, over which participants recorded a narration that told the story of their film. Again the film topics chosen by participants focussed on social issues that were important to the young people involved (in this case gender-based violence, bullying, community crime). Again, the production of the films was followed by a community screening.

This led to a third, larger-scale iteration of the project, during which we sought both to roll the project out beyond the particular ISP we had been working with and also to focus on a specific issue that had been raised by BST/TI as important to these communities and that fitted with the wider remit of the ‘Voicing Hidden Histories’ project: the legacy of apartheid and its relationship to human-rights education, with the particular aim of challenging contemporary xenophobia and the wider ramifications of this issue for young people in South Africa today — particularly for the ‘undocumented children’ (children with no birth certificate) who use the safe park. The aim of this iteration was also to explore more explicitly the advocacy potential of this work. In this regard, we were supported by the Johannesburg Holocaust and

Genocide Foundation, which provided a week-long seminar focussing on the issue of xenophobia and the role of our participants as 'youth leaders' in challenging this.

Over the course of this iteration, a number of films were made that addressed issues connected broadly to xenophobia, following our previous model. However, at this point, it became clear that there needed to be much more of an explicit focus on the question of leadership, in and of itself, rather than focussing on filmmaking and assuming that, through their participation in this process, the young people involved would develop the kinds of skills that would allow them to take on roles in their youth committees. It was only through this explicit self-reflection that the young people began to engage with the overall aims of the project, to see a value in taking ownership of this process, and to begin to see that their voice matters in their community and that '[human] rights are [not just] for people with money', as one young participant in the project explained poignantly to one member of the team as they sought to generate a discussion early on in this iteration on the question of xenophobia.

This shift in focus also brought with it a shift in both the content and form of some of the films produced. While participants broadly agreed that the social issues examined in the films to that point were 'important concerns', it became increasingly clear that a greater priority was that their ISP could function and that they had been fed. Here feedback from participants again focussed on the question of sustainability. Yet, whilst the issue of a lack of equipment continued to be raised by participants as a barrier to their independent

engagement with the process (however accessible we attempted to make the equipment used), it also became clear that a more important problem was the gap between the issues that the groups independently wanted to raise with their wider community and the issues the project had elicited from the groups to that point, issues which had led us to consider that xenophobia and undocumented children would be an appropriate focus for the *Voicing Hidden Histories* iteration. Thus, towards the end of the project, focus shifted explicitly to the sustainability of the ISPs and the role of the youth committees themselves. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, this, in turn, ultimately allowed for more explicit reflection on the role of human rights in their everyday experience, as participants could now see the relevance of this discussion. This shift in focus also saw groups moving from producing dramas to documentaries, as they sought to present their ISPs more directly to the outside world in order to raise awareness of the specific challenges they and their communities face due, primarily to a lack of resources (Leth'iThemba 2017).

The emphasis of the project also shifted from production to the role of exhibition as an advocacy tool at this point. Groups began to think about the kind of events they themselves wished to organise that could both showcase their films and draw in the key community stakeholders they wished to lobby, such as church leaders and local councillors. At the same time, the arts practices included in these events widened to showcase the talents of a broader range of ISP users than those involved in the films. In particular groups of young people produced heritage dances, singing performances as

well as poems and short stories. Moreover, it again became clear that the young people we were working with were keen to move beyond the social problem films that had initially been at the heart of the project's approach to PV as a tool for advocacy. Consequently, the project learnt, somewhat belatedly perhaps, a lesson that we could have taken from the Fogo Process, namely that PV tends to be more effective if social commentary is mixed with what Crocker calls 'more lyrical [...] uplifting affirmative films' in order to provide a more rounded image of community life (Crocker 2003, p.127).

It is clear that there is a great appetite amongst the organisations involved in this project to continue our work together with an even broader range of ISPs. However, it is also clear that going forward the process must be more roundly focussed on leadership development and that our understanding of leadership must start from the point of view of participants. Through a clearer sense of what leadership means, and what is understood by advocacy, it is felt that the young people will be able to take stronger ownership of the process, to which, participants also agree, filmmaking should be a key, but not an exclusive, artistic practice. Crucially, it would appear that it is this issue, rather than the question of technology, that is the key barrier to sustainability. That said, as we also learnt from project feedback, the work that the young people have produced to date should not be dismissed. Participants are very proud of what they have achieved thus far and the value of raising the issues they have explored with their wider communities. With this in mind, we wish now to turn to a discussion of some of the films that have been made so far during the project and the place of participants' voice in these texts, exploring how the

films both highlight the issues these young people face in their everyday lives, and their ability to reflect in complex ways on the nature of these issues.

### **Celebrating Participatory Videos as Videos with Something to Say**

One of the most striking aspects of the films produced is their impulse towards 'denotative' rather than 'connotative' forms of representation. *Tit for Tat* (Tshepo Hope 2016), for example, culminates in a violent attack on a young girl (Amanda) by her boyfriend (Pelican). We see and hear the boy repeatedly stamp on what the film suggests is the girl's head, a reflection, the person playing the boyfriend insists, of both the reality of their lives and the way they are frequently presented on screen. As aesthetic points of reference, he refers both to Nollywood, which often has a similarly denotative approach to film communication (Okwuowulu 2015, p.106), and to those films about South Africa that tend to circulate internationally. While the group's insistence on local reference points in their filmmaking reminds us that any cinema which seeks to empower specific communities must be *situated* if it is going to be effective, and cannot be fully described by a broad category like 'Third Cinema' (Auguiste 2015, p.215), the group also maintains that its denotative approach to filmmaking is a deliberate strategy. In *Tit for Tat* the group insisted upon showing the violence directly because, they argue, this is the reality of their lives. However, crucially they also demanded that the film had a happy ending. Amanda eventually marries the doctor who diagnoses that she is HIV+, having been infected by her boyfriend. Here the film plays on classical forms of theatre. Weddings, of course, tend to provide the conclusion

for comedies, as opposed to the death and destruction of tragedies. Such an ending would seem to be out of place in this story, which has all the hallmarks of tragedy. Nonetheless, the group maintained that its use here is yet another denotative declaration of the reality of their lives. Their lives are violent and precarious. However, their use of narrative conventions ostensibly out of kilter with the content of their story also suggests a refusal to present their lives as tragic. It is possible for them to continue to survive and have a 'happy ending'.

As one member of the group put it:

There's a stigma around our township, that when you fall pregnant at an early age, you're going to be nothing, you know. It's done. And there's this other stigma, that when you're infected with HIV, you can't be happy. With this story, we're trying to portray that despite anything that can happen to one individual, good can happen to that person after all.



**Fig. 12.1. Marriage at the end of a tragedy (Still from *Tit for Tat*).**

As is suggested in the way these films play with narrative conventions, while there is a deliberate attempt to focus on the power of denotative communication, this can bring with it other connotations that speak symbolically to the world in which these young people live. *Heaven Hugged*

*Me* (Tshepo Hope 2017), for example, is a film made by a group of six-to-ten year olds that tells the story of a young gangster who wants to rebuild his life after prison. The group again wanted to reflect the kinds of narratives they see on screen about themselves and their communities. However, the fact that the group consisted of young children led them to use a preponderance of low-angle shots, presenting the external world as an overwhelming environment, over which they have little control. It is as if the extra-diegetic reality repeatedly breaks into the diegesis, forcing the spectator into a dialectical relationship with this reality, akin to that suggested by Solanas and Getino, and forcing her/him to reflect upon the film's conditions of production. Similarly, in other films such as *When You Strike a Woman You Strike a Rock* (Boniswe Field 2017), the film's voiceover is repeatedly drowned out by the sound of wind, highlighting not only the precarious nature of this community's existence (there was nowhere that they could find shelter to record the sound track), but also the symbolism of wind as an irresistible force of nature, just like the powerful young women we meet in the film who refuse to acquiesce to the forces of gender-based violence that surround them.





**Fig. 12.2. Frequent use of low-angle shots reinforcing the perspective of the film team (Still from *Heaven Hugged Me*).**

As hinted at above in their evocation of classical tropes, these films tend to be quite theatrical in their visual composition. Frequently, the groups use long takes, simply allowing the action to play out in front of them. Such an approach to cinema tends to foreground the performance of the actors — rather than narrative suspense or cinematic spectacle. However, in these films, the use of non-professional actors frequently foregrounds their inability to maintain the suspension of disbelief required for long-take filmmaking. In *Heaven Hugged Me*, the voiceover explains that the gangster’s sister, Twinky, is seriously ill. But as the camera focuses on her face, Twinky faintly smiles. The young girl playing the role breaks through the illusion of the narrative, reminding us of the incongruity of the situation. These are children playing a role. From a UK perspective at least, this is a story that one would not expect children to perform, and certainly not to have come up with themselves. This young girl’s smile reminds us that she is a participant in a filmmaking project.

And yet, it also highlights the potentially distressing nature of her life and the life experience that meant she could contribute to the development of this particular story. The tension between the performance and the story's content often leads to the generation of 'affect'. If, as Deleuze suggests, 'affect' is the product of the space between a movement on screen and its resolution into an emotion in the spectator — what he terms 'the centre of indetermination' (1986, p.68) — these films continually generate and extend such 'indetermination'. We are regularly jarred out of the diegesis and into the reality of the filmmakers' lives, which is, invariably, the basis *for* the diegesis, maximizing the film's affective qualities and forcing the spectator to reflect upon their relationship to the images on screen.

Affect is not a fixed phenomenon. It is contingent on the relationship between spectator and screen. Indeed, the meaning of a film is always produced as much by the context of consumption as it is by production. Here one might mention, for example, the US government's attempts to 're-educate' Germans after the Second World War by force-feeding audiences a diet of Westerns. While the intention was to highlight the 'democratic values' of the American dream, the films were often received by audiences in Germany as depictions of genocide against Native Americans, reminiscent of Nazi atrocities (Fay 2008, p.81). Similarly with these films, their meaning changes according to the context in which they are watched. Within the townships, the discussion generated at screenings initially might focus on the technical aspects of the film. Participants might reflect upon what they could have done differently. Subsequently, when the films are screened to their wider community, the

mood tends towards celebration and pride at what the participants have achieved. However, for spectators not directly connected to the production team, be that local councillors or, indeed, UK universities, the focus tends to be on the content of the stories and here, again, affect plays a key role. In *The Journey of My Life* (Leth'iThemba 2017), the story of a girl who is exploited by an older man for sex, audiences in the UK often laugh at the film's opening sequence, where we see the film's central protagonist flirting, somewhat crassly, with the man who will come to exploit her. At this point it is not clear to the spectator the full nature of the relationship between these two characters. However, the response shifts to palpable discomfort when the voiceover tells us that this girl is actually HIV+ and two weeks pregnant. The potential clumsiness of the screenplay creates an affective moment of 'indetermination' in the film that seems to force spectators not directly connected to the production to respond with discomfort to, and ultimately reflection upon, what they are watching. Comedic codes again give way to tragedy, and the spectator is left not knowing how to react. Such confusion might be praised as a powerful cinematic tool in the hands of canonical film directors. However, it is generally ignored in PV projects. We hope to have shown here that looking at the films in this PV project as *films* in their own right allows us further to explore the possibilities of such projects, and to understand the complexity of the community voices PV projects invariably seek to amplify.



**Fig. 12.3. The actress smiles, breaking the illusion of reality (Still from *Heaven Hugged Me*)**

### **Reflections and Conclusions**

By way of conclusion, we wish to draw out some of the key points raised in feedback from participants, as well as the broader discussion that took place in the evaluation event held at Leeds, once again reflecting on how this discussion also shapes our thinking about the question of voice. As noted from feedback mentioned above, participants were overwhelmingly enthusiastic in their praise for PV as an activity, pointing to the way that developing and filming their stories provided them with a strong sense of personal achievement. Typical comments from participants include: 'I enjoyed going to the locations and making the story a reality'; 'It was the best experience, like, touching a camera for the first time.' In particular, participants pointed to the discipline involved in making a film, and how they found this both challenging and rewarding:

I personally like working under pressure. I know some people do panic, but it's my favourite thing, because everyone's on their toes. So we push and push to achieve (Participant).

The most difficult thing is when you shoot, sometimes you forget where you must focus on, when you take a picture, you cut at the same time. So it's very difficult. You must be very very focussed and you must be very very clear with your job and do it well (Participant).

However, in feedback questionnaires, participants regularly also commented on the need for more training, support, and above all equipment, to be able to embed the project in the long-term practice of the ISPs. In answer to the questions about what further support participants would find useful, there were repeated requests for 'more training' as well as for greater access to equipment ('more cameras' is a repeated request).

That said, as the project team began to appreciate over several iterations of the project, at least as important for the longer-term sustainability of this work was the need to have a clearer understanding of the core goal of this work. As already noted, in this case, this led us to put a far greater emphasis on the leadership rather than the filmmaking aspect of our work as the project developed. Yet even once we had established, collectively, what the primary focus of our work together was to be, it was clear to all concerned that having a genuine and sustainable impact from this project on the communities will take time and cannot be achieved by this project alone. Our work must be fully embedded not only in the practice of BST/TI but also in the local ISP support infrastructure, as well as the national policy of the agencies that oversee the ISPs. 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 that this work moves beyond

simply 'being a project'. This is, of course, far from being a new issue in participatory arts or development projects generally, and continues to be a major obstacle to creating significant change. With regard to our PV programme, our concern with sustainability has led to very fruitful discussions with the National Association of Child Care Workers, the organisation that accredits ISPs, about developing a leadership programme that can be built into the national standards of the scheme.

While the question of sustainability was a key point of discussion in our project evaluation, it was not the only dimension of this work to be explored. Although we did not set out with a specifically therapeutic aim for the arts practice used in the project, focussed as it was on questions of empowerment, advocacy and leadership, it was clear that for some participants, the arts — both as they were experienced within the project and in their lives more generally, did have this potential. Participants talked of art as a source of 'refuge'. Building a safe and supportive environment is important in any responsible arts initiative with vulnerable people, and both participants and project facilitators experienced the emergence of such safe spaces during the project. At times, this involved balancing the 'content' of a given discussion about a particular social issue with the need to ensure that there was enough room for participants simply to enjoy taking part. Although the films created were generally topic-based, as the project developed it became clear that the artistic process allowed them a space not only to discuss issues such as xenophobia, but also to escape these same issues. As one of our facilitators noted:

Life in South Africa is inherently political, and the young people involved in the project are very aware of the fact that they are the way they are because of their collective past, apartheid and what has been done to them. However, they generally do not want to talk about this fact.

Thus, it became increasingly clear that simply enjoying creating art was a crucial aspect of this work, allowing the children involved in the project simply to be children, allowing them 'to breathe', as this same facilitator put it. At the same time, we were also careful to avoid the art becoming a direct form of 'therapy'. The metaphor of art as a 'breathing space' was also useful in this regard. Artistic practice became a collective space in which participants could explore difficult topics without having directly to expose, or engage with, any personal traumas. Moreover, it also became clear that breathing spaces needed to be created for the practitioners delivering the work who often, through their work, become containers for the stories and experiences of the group they are working with. From our project, it became very clear that ensuring practitioners have a structure of support around them is crucial both for the practitioners' wellbeing and, in turn, for the sustainability of a project.

Another important question in our discussion was the topics chosen by participants for their films. Here we explored the potential impact of 'The Observer's Paradox', the term coined by William Labov to explain the problem that exists in trying to record natural, everyday speech through the act of observation, where the presence of the observer inherently affects the way subjects behave (Labov 1972). 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' facilitators are expecting — was identified. At the outset of the project, the participants' choices appeared to reflect existing, well-known, narratives that we were not sure were necessarily their own. The causes for this are numerous: the simple presence of observers in the room; the saturation of development agencies working with this and other groups in the area on these types of projects as well as externally driven funding agendas. Martin Keat, the Director of the Bishop Simeon Trust, however, suggested that this tendency might also offer an opportunity for development projects. If we root our work in a form of 'co-production', where everyone involved has an equal stake in the work, and where everyone's knowledge is respected and valued, the Observers' Paradox no longer necessarily pertains, because a given project is not trying to 'extract' knowledge *from* the community, but rather to work in partnership *with* the community, to collectively develop answers to the problems they face, or that they might potentially face. Moreover, looking at how the types of films made have changed over the course of the project (in our case from 'social problem' films to more 'celebratory' films and other artistic products aimed at showing the potential of the community) might also be reflective of the participants' own development pathway, highlighting their changing personal response to their 'development narratives', as Keat termed them:

In a way I think [the choice of stories] also reflected how they wanted to [understand] 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 these narratives, and then reflect on whether or not they are a true representation of their experience might, therefore, be as much an opportunity for development as it is a challenge.

Our assessment of the Observer's Paradox in this context notwithstanding, we now come to the final issue that we want to raise here, an issue that is always at the heart of these kinds of projects and that must always be a central point of reflection in any form of participatory practice, namely the question of asymmetrical power relations between the various external stakeholders involved and participant groups (be it the University of Leeds or the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which funded the project), within participant groups, as well as throughout the participatory process itself. These power relations were always apparent during our project, but also shifted over time. With regard to the relationship between the external project team and community participants, the power imbalance was manifest, for example, in the suspicion of the former by the latter. This was generally particularly evident at the outset of each iteration, with the project team invariably needing to re-establish trust with participants. In our project evaluation, we agreed that this was inevitable, that facilitators were invariably perceived as being both 'different from' and 'more powerful than' participants, even if they came from similar communities to participants.

Addressing this power imbalance is also linked to the issue of sustainability outlined above. Overcoming suspicion towards the external team will also be helped, we feel, by shifting the nature of our work from being a periodic

'project' to it being embedded within the mainstream practice of the organisations involved. It is, of course, also only at this point that we will be fully able to evaluate the utility of our approach to leadership development. Through our on-going discussions with the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW), it would appear that we are currently moving towards this point. If, however, we cannot ultimately achieve this level of 'buy in' for our scheme, it is clear that our approach will ultimately not be successful. This is a lesson that we must also be willing to accept. Yet more important still than this, indeed the most important message that we take from our work so far, is that we must continue to reflect on how our planning and development processes can be driven by the children and young people we have been working with themselves. It is their voice which is central to this work, both politically and aesthetically, and is only by listening to this voice that this work has any real chance of becoming sustainable in the long term.

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