Participatory methods =/= inclusive methods

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Under various labels, participatory methods are seen as new ways to create inclusive platforms for diverse voices, to access research data, to access new sites of where the phenomena we are interested in take place. They arguably offer new perspectives and new ways to examine how phenomena are understood and enacted. They potentially have the power to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and discourses.

Participatory methods rely on long-term relationships between researchers and communities where all parties make substantial contributions toward co-design, co-delivery, co-evaluation, and co-governance of solutions and initiatives. Inclusion is an element of effective participatory methods and indeed the reason for participatory methods. Effective participatory methods require diverse communities to be included, while by creating platforms for communities' voices, participatory methods place communities at the heart of decision making relevant to their lived experiences.

Yet, how inclusive are participatory methods? Whom do they exclude?

The very brief answer is that participatory methods have the potential to exclude anyone who is not already in a position of privilege and power and thus replicate existing dynamics of exclusion. Indeed, when they are not mindfully designed and enacted, they can create yet another platform for the usual suspects to be heard.

Participatory methods often start with co-design events where different creative stimuli are used to catalyse collaborative decision making that prioritises the needs and ideas of those with lived experiences in the room. Yet, co-design events as an initial step of participatory methods are very exclusive by their nature. They are one example of the biases embedded in the early stages of the participatory process that are replicated and enhanced at the following stages of the process. As someone who has spent a lot of time facilitating co-design events, it has taken me awhile to move from "Yes, co-design events are not perfect, but what are the alternatives?" to acknowledging the multiple aspects in which they exclude many and trying to unlearn practices and assumptions that lead to exclusion. One co-design event at a time.

Anyone who has been a part of a co-design event knows they are often loud, overwhelming with stimuli, physically dynamic, and require high levels of energy. Indeed, participating in these events requires physical, emotional, and cognitive capacities that often pose high barriers to participation for many people. Individuals with differently abled bodies, anxiety, PTSD (all common in post-conflict settings), neurodiversity, older age, or chronic pain might find co-design events challenging to participate in. For example, the levels of noise that are often created during co-design events reduce the effectiveness of certain types of hearing aids, while the dynamic nature makes it difficult to identity who is speaking for lipreading purposes.

The taken-for-granted practices of co-design events are damaging even for facilitators. My own preparation for such events used to start with "This will be a tough day/tough few days. I can do this. I will recover afterward." As a facilitator, I used to (and still do) cope with co-design events with an unlimited supply for chocolate, coffee, and carefully selected comfortable shoes. I assumed this was part of the process because this is how everyone else around me prepares for co-design events. Yet, chocolate, coffee, or comfortable shoes are not

sufficient to decrease pain or exhaustion, or other barriers to participation. At the same time, our practices may "out" individuals and force them to disclose the identities that are not accommodated by our choices.

These dynamics of exclusion start before individuals enter the room to participate in a co-design event and continue in the next stages of the process. Co-design events require a certain level of confidence and self-esteem. They require that an individual believes: "My experience matters. It is worth sharing." This level of confidence is a privilege not granted to individuals who may be vulnerable for any number of reasons and whose experiences have been marginalised over time. These high barriers to participation persist and are enhanced in the following stages of co-delivery, co-evaluation, and/or co-governance. For example, co-delivery and co-evaluation require not only confidence and skills, but also time to engage in these activities. Time that might not be easily available for a young person who is balancing their own education, looking after siblings, and possibly trying to contribute to their family's income.

Photo Credit: Claudine Imelda

What can make participatory methods more inclusive?

In attempting to make participatory methods, beyond co-design events, more inclusive, I am grateful to have patient and generous participants and facilitators who have helped me to unlearn certain practices and to learn new ones. Including:

- **_Co-create the co-design event and the basics of the process with those who live the phenomenon._** Yes, that sounds very meta. But ask what seem like silly questions of what will make a difference to individuals' participation and give examples. People might take it for granted that a quiet space makes a difference for them and not mention it. A few things that make a difference include:

Sit down. Literally, just use the chairs as much as possible. Enough with the assumption that standing up to play with sticky notes and other materials allows for a better flow of ideas and connections between ideas. Ideas will flow when people are not in pain from standing up.

Use large spaces that have capacity much bigger than what you need. Take advantage of the space to minimise background noise. It makes it easier for people to hear what is happening. It makes it less overwhelming and exhausting.

Use a microphone. You might think "I don't need it. The space is small." or "No one else has a microphone, me as a facilitator not using one creates a sense of equality.". But others do need it. It is not about me or you as a facilitator. It is about everyone else in the room.

Work in very small groups with a facilitator for each group. Provide verbal and written descriptions of tasks/questions/activities for the group to engage with.

Have a quiet and comfortable space that is different from the main work space for the event. A lot of people will thank you, including women who are breastfeeding, individuals who are neurodiverse, and introverts, and the quality of their input will be higher.

Create opportunities for individuals to participate outside the co-design event. This means opportunities for them to participate before the event whereby their input is shared with others during the event. It also means opportunities to participate after the event so they can contribute to the input that is generated by those at the event.

- ***Build on trust and dignity so individuals feel safe to co-create the process.*** Coming forward to say "I need this so I can participate" requires trust. Believing "My story is worth sharing." comes from being treated with dignity. Indeed, a co-design event or a similar formal collaborative engagement is not the first phase of the process. A co-design event is the result of meaningful engagement, showing up, and not disappointing individuals time and time again.

- **Put yourself in the shoes of the participants.** Take into consideration how any element of the process or the space can exclude someone whose experience matters. Put yourself in the shoes of your participants and enact every part of the co-design event (or any other aspect of the process).

- **Learn from each event/interaction and record your learning.**

What else have you learnt to make participatory methods more inclusive?

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PARTICIPATORY METHODS

https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/2020/01/29/participatory-methods-inclusive-methods/