
1-20-2014

Liberatory Ethnographic Research - Changing the Lives of Researchers and Participants

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Recommended APA Citation

Waingort, E. (2014). Liberatory Ethnographic Research - Changing the Lives of Researchers and Participants. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(3), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1285>

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Abstract

In their book on participatory research, Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper provide a thorough look at various visual and digital tools that can be used in collaboration with traditionally oppressed communities to empower and change the course of their lives.

Keywords

Visual Research Methods, Digital Research Methods, Collaborative Research, Participatory Research, Social Change, Liberatory

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Liberatory Ethnographic Research – Changing the Lives of Researchers and Participants

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In their book on participatory research, Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper provide a thorough look at various visual and digital tools that can be used in collaboration with traditionally oppressed communities to empower and change the course of their lives. Keywords: Visual Research Methods, Digital Research Methods, Collaborative Research, Participatory Research, Social Change, Liberatory

In this participatory frame, research is recast as an emancipatory process through which participants may reflect on problems and issues in their communities, with possibilities for growth as citizens, activists, and users of technologies.
(Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 200)

It is with these final words that Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper sum up the purpose and intent of participatory action research (PAR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR): to re-form and reposition the subjects of research as active participants and co-researchers in their own right. The extent to which this happens depends on a number of variables but the possibilities inherent in this approach can be life changing for participants and researchers alike. The historical lessons learned from treating vulnerable research participants as merely objects of their own research have moved qualitative researchers to seek, or stumble upon in some cases, a different way of doing research. Gubrium and Harper acknowledge the criticism that research done *to* participants rather than *with* and *for* them is in need of reappraisal.

The multipronged critique of traditional ethnography – articulated by postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern scholars since the 1970's and 1980's – has pressed qualitative social scientists to reconsider earlier positivist approaches and the power imbalance inherent in fieldwork on and academic writing about historically oppressed groups. Engaged scholars have turned to participatory visual and digital methods as a means of responding to these varied intellectual critiques in their research practice. (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 27)

Although there may be other methods that can be used in participatory research, the appeal and relative ease of use of visual and digital methods place the researcher and the participant on equal footing by dissolving the power differential that has traditionally existed between academics and non-academics.

Participatory Visual and Digital Methods is a must read for all novice and experienced researchers. The rapidly changing nature of visual and digital tools, including greater access through the Internet, is impacting how research is done, as well as who is doing the research. PAR and CBPR are changing the dynamics of the traditional relationship between the academic researcher and the subjects of the research. Many researchers have been experimenting with how to increase participants' involvement as co-researchers by

“putting the methods literally in the hands of the participants themselves and allowing for greater access to social research knowledge beyond the academy” (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 13).

The first two chapters, the Introduction and Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Theory and Practice, Gubrium and Harper give general yet useful background information about PAR and CBPR, setting the stage for the reader as she navigates the specificities of each digital or visual tool highlighted in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, Gubrium and Harper are extremely sensitive to the ethical issues surrounding digital research, which include traditional and new concerns that must be addressed to protect vulnerable participants and communities, by making this an important aspect of each chapter.

All of the chapters in this book thoughtfully and masterfully detail various visual and digital tools available to researchers - Photovoice, collaborative and participatory film and videomaking, digital storytelling, participatory GIS (PGIS), and participatory digital archives and exhibitions - then offers several case studies of how researchers have applied and adapted their research approach and tools to meet the needs of the participants and their own research goals. In order to stay true to the participatory and collaborative nature of PAR, some researchers have given up control to the research participants in order to create a truly collaborative project that impacts the individuals and communities involved.

The challenge of participatory data analysis is given its own chapter, Opening up Data Analysis, Writing, and Research Products. This chapter summarizes how researchers can use primary texts (representation, “what” questions), producer texts (production process, “how” questions), and audience texts (reception and performance, “why,” “when,” and “for whom” questions) [Gubrium & Harper, 2013] to imbue their research with a range of points of view from participants, and observers of the final product.

Some of the themes that run throughout this book are: the increasing use of digital tools in society including the disparity in access in some of the communities where collaborative research is being conducted and how this may impact PAR; new and old ethical considerations in this type of research; the extent of participant involvement; the need to educate IRB on the importance and purpose of PAR and CBPR; and the issue of who produces and owns the knowledge in a research project. Since PAR, as a methodology originating in ethnography, is concerned with collaboration between the researcher and the participants, “researchers consciously choose participatory visual methods so that members of oppressed groups may challenge dominant representations and make themselves seen and heard” (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 34). In PAR research, participants become “co-designers, co-investigators, co-analysts, and co-producers of knowledge” (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 43) in collaboration with the researcher.

Participatory Visual and Digital Methods thoroughly addresses the multiplicity of issues that must be considered by researchers when attempting a PAR project. The most controversial of these issues has to do with the construction and dissemination of knowledge. How important is it for the researcher to collaborate with the participants? How involved do the participants want to be in the research process? What are the issues of privacy that must be considered so that the participants are not placed in danger when revealing sensitive data? And, as the authors warn, if the digital tool does not enhance the research process and potential outcomes, then it’s best not to use it. PAR also requires careful considerations of consent throughout the research process, not just at the outset. Finally, the researcher must be committed to a social change activist approach in order to engage in PAR.

The examples of successful projects documented in this book demonstrate that this kind of research is worth pursuing. I have been motivated to rethink my own research both inside and outside the classroom, in order to find ways to include students and teachers, respectively as co-researchers.

Reference

Gubrium, A., & Harper, K. (2013). *Participatory visual and digital methods*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.

Author Note

Elisa Waingort is an ESL Teacher at Academia Cotopaxi in Quito, Ecuador, where she also serves on the Elementary Section Steering Committee of the NCTE. She may be contacted at elisawaingort5@gmail.com.

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Article Citation

Waingort, E. (2014). Liberatory ethnographic research – Changing the lives of researchers and participants. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(Rev. 3), 1-3. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/waingort3.pdf>
