

Ethics of Participatory Visual Research to Address Gender-Based Violence



BRIEFING PAPER

THIS BRIEFING...

In this briefing paper, we discuss **key ethical issues** that arose in our work in rural South Africa to address **sexual violence** with girls and young women.

We also share the **strategies** that we adopted to address these issues. Many of these ethical issues will apply to other contexts, while the appropriate strategies may be slightly different.

By sharing these learnings, we aim to help others to use PVR **safely** in contexts of marginality.

INTRODUCTION

In participatory visual research (PVR), researchers use artistic tools such as film, drawing and photography to plan and conduct research *with* the people whose lives are under study and often to catalyse grassroots social change.

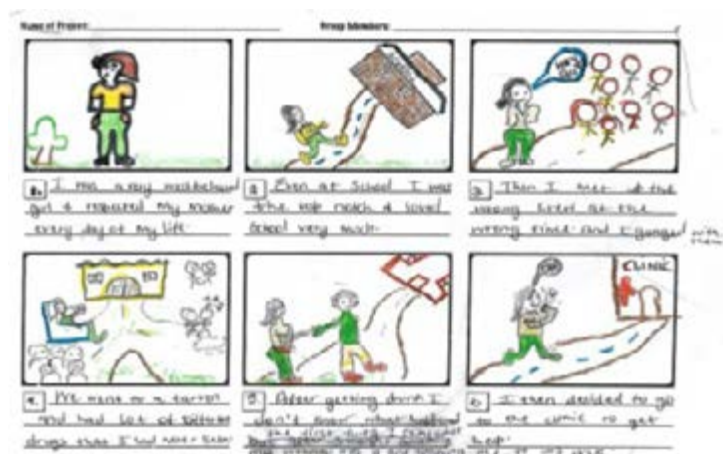
PVR tools are useful when working with vulnerable or marginalised groups, such as the youth or those living in poverty. Yet, the the risk of harm is high and ethical issues can arise, particularly when sensitive topics are addressed.

Thus, institutional review boards (IRBs) and Research Ethics Committees (RECs) require extra safety measures to be in place. These measures are often seen as barriers to using PVR methods in these contexts.

WHY PVR?

The process of PVR can:

- help to make research more democratic;
- help to make research more fun;
- stimulate dialogue about key issues;
- catalyse social change;
- allow new/previously silent voices to be heard;
- bring new or taboo subjects to the fore;
- allow for joint knowledge creation;
- help to form and answer new questions;
- help to form new hypotheses.



A storyboard used to plan a 'cellphilm' –short film made on a smartphone



Working together to create a cellphilm, South Africa, 2017

ETHICAL ISSUES AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM: 1-3

ETHICAL ISSUE 1

Topic sensitivity:

Is it possible to broach sensitive/taboo topics safely?

STRATEGY: *Start with a broader topic*

We do not force co-researcher participants to discuss sexual violence directly. Rather, we allow such issues to surface organically by focusing on the related, but broader, topic of 'girls' safety'. **We believe that the adoption of a broader and less sensitive topic has reduced the risk of unintended disclosure or re-traumatization.**



Talking about girls' safety in a story circle, South Africa, 2017

ETHICAL ISSUE 2

Assent and consent:

Who provides consent and when?

STRATEGY: *Informed consent & assent*

- We adopt a **multistep assent and consent process**. We ask co-researcher participants (or her guardian in the case of minors) to provide informed consent at the beginning of the project by signing forms in their preferred language. Once they have viewed their work, we request official release of visual material for public sharing.
- We often **remind** co-researcher participants *verbally* and *informally* that their participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time.

ETHICAL ISSUE 3

Giving value:

How can one acknowledge co-researcher participants when IRBs often require anonymity and warn against economic coercion in resource poor settings?

STRATEGIES: *Listening & groups names*

- **Listening:** We listen to participant suggestions and use these ideas in our work whenever possible.
- **Skills:** We incorporate leadership, art and technology training to make research fun and rewarding.
- **Group name:** We encourage co-researcher participants to choose a name for themselves, which helps with group cohesion and allows us to safely acknowledge them without disclosing individual identities.
- **Transport stipend:** To avoid economic coercion we do not pay for attendance. Yet, we do reimburse those who live too far to walk to our central venue.

ETHICAL ISSUES AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM: 4-7

ETHICAL ISSUE 4

Ownership:

How can one negotiate the complexities of ownership when visual products are created through group work or when multiple partners are involved?

STRATEGY: *Clarity*

We **communicate clearly** in writing, from the outset, who will own the visual products produced. For ethical reasons, it is not always possible to name the creators of the visual products, or to allow them to share their work freely.

Yet, we try boost a sense of ownership by involving them in key decision making, such as how their products are used and who gets to see them.

ETHICAL ISSUE 5

Identity disclosure:

What to do when IRBs /co-researcher participants wish to conceal personal identities?

STRATEGY: *Symbolism, pseudonyms & group work*

- **Symbolism:** In workshops, girls and young women learn how to use tools, such as drawing and symbolic photography to share their ideas without sharing identities.
- **Pseudonyms:** Girls often select a pseudonym.
- **Group work:** Girls work in small groups to create fictional, but realistic collective expressions of their safety. Group storytelling is faster and happier through peer interaction and support and is less likely to trigger trauma or personal disclosure.



Above: An anonymous portrait to illustrate a 'digital story' short film, South Africa 2016

ETHICAL ISSUE 6

Recruitment:

What can one do when a greater number of participants are interested than one anticipated?

STRATEGIES: *Be inclusive*

We **are as inclusive as possible**, because youth have few chances to address sensitive topics such as sexual violence and their opinions and experiences are so valuable. Moreover, sexual violence affects everyone and the inclusion of boys, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our work is likely to bring a deep understanding of this key topic.

ETHICAL ISSUE 7

Triggering past trauma:

How can one prepare for the risk of re-traumatization or respond to reports of abuse should these occur in a workshop?

STRATEGIES: *Facilitation team*

We use an **experienced team** for PVR workshop facilitation and partner with local organizations **to ensure that trained counsellors are available to provide emotional support both during and/or after the workshop**, should re-traumatization occur or if co-researcher participants **chose to report a case of personal abuse**.

ETHICAL ISSUES AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM: 8-10

ETHICAL ISSUE 8

Audiences:

- Who is the audience?
- Should the **girls or the researcher** be the ones to present the work?
- What does the audience need to know prior to the screening?



STRATEGY: *Be careful*

- There may be **many potential audiences**: peers and family members, community representatives, local, regional/national policy makers and online audiences.
- There is **no one correct answer** to this issue. In our work, we originally wanted the girls and young women to present the work themselves to identified policymakers. Yet, in the community exhibitions we have decided to present the work ourselves because some of the issues that the girls and young women have raised challenge dominant cultural norms and we wanted to take them out of the 'firing line'.
- **What the audience needs to know** will change depending on the location of the screening. A brief introduction to the project, participatory methods would be useful and perhaps, in our case a reminder of the fact that these are fictional stories drawn from collective views rather than personal accounts of abuse.

ETHICAL ISSUE 9

Catalyzing social change:

The project may catalyze social change on many levels. How will co-researcher participants adjust to these shifts?

STRATEGY: *Be open*

It is important to be open from the outset that while PVR is known to bring about positive changes for co-researcher participants, there may also be **unintended adverse consequences**.

- For example, while the co-researcher participants in our project have learnt new skills and reported a greater sense of confidence and self-belief, we also know that the project has changed social dynamics in this close community and that this may have negative consequences for participants.
- For example, there has been certain jealousy between co-researcher participants and 'outsiders' and between old and new group members. Moreover, some parents have complained about the time that their children spend away from home.

ETHICAL ISSUE 10

Choosing technology:

Will the participants be able to use PVR tools when the university team is not present?



STRATEGIES: *Be mindful of the context*

- **Equipment**: We use entry-level tablets since they are similar to the smartphones/tablets that some participants own or have access to.
- **Software**: We also use software that is available for free download (aside from the cost of the data required for the download).
- **Safety**: We also engage youth in the safe use of this technology – how to avoid scams and viruses, on-line predators and bullying, or potentially risky behaviours such as sharing compromising photographs of themselves via social media
- **Skills**: Hands on experience of this technology will stand them in good stead.

QUESTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

REMAINING QUESTIONS

The ethical challenges outlined above are by no means an exhaustive list of those that may arise in the course of doing PVR. Moreover, we know that strategies presented here could be improved and that a number of key questions remain to be addressed.

These include:

1. How can we abide by the protocols of ethics boards while practicing an everyday ethics that is participatory, responsive and context relevant?
2. How can we ensure *meaningful* participation of co-researcher participants in all stages of the research lifecycle - from conception to publication?
3. What constitutes an ethical exit strategy from a community?

A girl-initiated awareness march against SGBV in rural KwaZulu-Natal



CONCLUSIONS

All research raises ethical questions – questions about respect, autonomy, justice, beneficence, and rigour. Ethics boards put systems in place to support and enforce ethical conduct in research – to safeguard participants from exploitation, abuse, and harm.

Research with marginalised and vulnerable populations, particularly that which makes use of less well-known and traditional research methods, such as PVR, will always be challenging. Yet, we argue that researchers and community workers should not be deterred by these challenges.

The value of PVR for community-based research that facilitates social change far outweighs the potential difficulties that may be faced with ethics boards and/or arise in the course of the research. As we have tried to demonstrate, there are strategies that can be employed that allow the research to continue while satisfying both the co-researcher participants and ethics boards.



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

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