

## **Using P.A.R. (title)**

### **Diversity & Inclusion**

My name is Katrina Stovold and I am a PhD student at Maynooth. I'm looking at best practices for building diversity and inclusion into media production crews. This includes examining where the power lies in media creation – creative and technical roles vs. coordination and administration, for instance – weighing factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background; and seeing at which points in the process equity breaks down. There are issues of education failing women and people of colour, exclusionary networking practices, unconscious biases that affect hiring, hostile work environments, and the lack of mentoring and promotion that mean even the most ambitious hiring goals cannot succeed because companies are unable to retain diverse talent.

### **Practical Outcomes**

My professional background, prior to my postgraduate education, includes film and visual effects, the military, and tech. In other words, many male-dominated fields; but also fields that frequently require practical solutions to problems and, often, those solutions need to be accessible by people from different backgrounds and levels of expertise. This has strongly influenced my approach to research. I believe that whatever discoveries are made, the information should be able to have some practical application towards solving problems and levelling the playing field for women and minorities.

Academic analyses are sometimes criticised as elitist, exclusionary, and incomprehensible. Media research, despite being based in communication, can be just as impenetrable, making it difficult to take discoveries and solutions to a wider audience. For those wishing to involve creative change-makers, particularly in a social justice context, Participatory Action Research (PAR) may be an effective method of engagement.

### **Participatory Action Research (lightbulb)**

I've only recently become aware of Participatory Action Research as an option for methodology. It came about while taking a sociology class at UCC with Prof. Maggie O'Neill. At first I didn't realise how different the approach was to the usual researcher–subject relationship, though in the end this turned out to be a major selling point. I had worked as a travel blogger for a number of years, trying to bring the larger world to my fellow Americans in a way that was infused with self-deprecating humour in order to let people know that other human inhabitants of the planet were, by and large, friendly. Yet, it wasn't easy to illustrate differences without seeming to objectify cultures different to my own. Hence, framing the stories with me as the bumbling American; I was attempting to objectify myself, rather than make the people I met into the 'other'. I was aware of the issues of power imbalances, colonialism, and white supremacy, but hadn't yet developed the vocabulary to express any it. As I proceeded through my master's degree, I became much more cognisant of such dynamics, including the harm frequently inflicted by the saviour mentality. Tools for empowerment became much more important than any externally conceived ideas about salvation.

A few, but not all, key descriptors of Participatory Action Research: it requires community “buy-in” – a prerequisite that deftly curbs the rescuer mindset often found in social justice contexts – it can be used in concert with other research techniques; it is both qualitative and quantitative; it encourages reflexivity. Described by one of its founders, Orlando Fals-Borda, as “praxis-inspired

commitment”, researchers work in and, most importantly, *with* communities to address issues in a context-specific manner, opening themselves up to listen and learn as much as record and analyse.<sup>1</sup>

## Examples

A number of PAR projects have involved creation of performance-based, display, or digital media, sometimes referred to as “participatory arts-based research”.<sup>2</sup> As part of the *Participation Arts and Social Action in Research* programme with Open University, Prof. Maggie O’Neill wrote about walking with migrant women in London.<sup>3</sup> The women drew maps and created a stage performance of their stories, which, in turn, facilitated the making of a short film.<sup>4</sup> Andrew Irving, likewise taking up the walking approach, co-created the photo essay *Dangerous substances and visible evidence: tears, blood, alcohol, pills* as a reflection of the inner dialogue experienced by a person newly diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.<sup>5</sup> Research commissioned by South Walsall Area Health Action Zone about street sex work, rather than becoming confrontational, resulted in a much more collaborative, and ultimately, empathetic outcome through interaction with engaged community organisations and the sex workers themselves. It included artworks, a website, and a pamphlet created by community members.<sup>6</sup>

### **Participation Arts and Social Action in Research** (from an article on OpenDemocracy.net):

There was a lot of work generated from this project. It included different groups of women and girls, different ages and legal status, and different types of created art.

‘...we worked with three groups. One comprised migrant mothers of primary schoolchildren in north London, some of whom did not speak English very well. They shared their experiences of racism, the effects of gentrification on their neighbourhoods and the sense of gendered and racialised insecurity. All had stories to share about feeling scared or intimidated when out at night...

We also worked with a group of 13-year-old girls from migrant backgrounds, and heard their stories about being stereotyped as potential shoplifters or troublemakers when in public. The third group were Black mothers who were subjected to the government’s ‘no recourse to public funds’ rules, which prevent people who are “subject to immigration control” from receiving income support, housing support or child benefits. Even though all these women were well established in the UK and in their communities—they had all been in the country for more than ten years, and had a firm sense of belonging established through their workplaces, neighbourhoods, church groups and family networks—when they experienced a personal crisis such as illness, unemployment or homelessness, they were not entitled to state support for themselves, but only for their children.’<sup>7</sup>

### **Dangerous substances and visible evidence: tears, blood, alcohol, pills**

This is more of an example of “walking fieldwork”, a technique employed in the previous example. In this way, the researcher is able to gain a more visceral experience of the process gone through by the person at the centre of the narrative. In this case, the researcher re-traced the walk made by Alberto many years prior, immediately after receiving a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, from the clinic to his home.

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1 Somekh, *Action Research a Methodology for Change and Development*, 35.

2 O’Neill, ‘Walking, Well-Being and Community’.

3 Ibid.

4 ‘Participation Arts and Social Action in Research - PASAR | Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences’.

5 Irving, ‘Dangerous Substances and Visible Evidence’.

6 Campbell and O’Neill, *Sex Work Now*, chap. 2.

7 Kaptani et al., ‘How an Artist-Academic Collaboration Worked to Amplify Migrant Women’s Voices | OpenDemocracy’.

“By placing the lived experience of the walking body directly into the field, the photo essay... uses ‘image, voice and walking’ to uncover how Manhattan’s streets, buildings and neighbourhoods are mediated by ongoing interior dialogues and lifeworlds rooted in a person’s current existential concerns. This extends the idea of ‘walking fieldwork’, whereby the author walked alongside people as they carried out significant journeys and asked them to narrate their thoughts as they emerged into a tape recorder... The walk and photo-essay are a collaborative attempt to understand the consciousness of someone confronting the radical uncertainty of their own existence in public – namely, a person who remains a social being and is required to act accordingly as they walk along the street, but whose inner dialogues and lifeworlds are not always made apparent to the wider world.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Working Together to Create Change** (note: black and white photo is from *Living with the Other*)

“[Prof. Maggie O’Neill and Dr. Rosie Campbell] were commissioned by Walsall South Health Action Zone to develop partnership responses to street-based sex work... having identified street prostitution as a significant issue for residents in terms of well-being and community safety... The researchers trained a group of community coresearchers who helped to conduct focus groups and observations, and completed an environmental mapping of street-based sex markets. An arts worker, based at Walsall Youth Arts, led 21 arts-based creative consultation workshops supported by the researchers.”<sup>9</sup>

“One outcome of the consultation research was to show that collaboration (with local committees, agencies, residents, as well as sex workers) produces rich understanding as well as ‘social texts’ useful to the wider community (including local and national policy makers). Together, the research team were able to document the complexity of the issues and developed a multi-layered package of responses....”<sup>10</sup>

#### From Safety Soapbox:

“Residents and traders of Caldmore, Pleck and Palfrey, women who work on the streets and professionals working with them gave researchers their opinions about prostitution. As a result a report *Working Together To Create Change* was produced... Prostitution has been around as long as humanity so expectations that it can be eradicated are unrealistic. By working together and making information available, situations can be managed more successfully. Images of the artwork were put on show at Walsall’s New Art Gallery in 2001 The research was funded through HAZ (Health Action Zone).”<sup>11</sup>

#### Referring to the project in their book *Sex Work Now*, Campbell and O’Neill state:

“Rather than mapping identity, discourse and meaning onto sex workers’ bodies, a radical democratic imaginary, as part of an agenda for change, reflects the broader aims and scope of this collection, situating sex workers’ voices and biographies at the centre of knowledge production.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Sustainability and Training**

The solutions undertaken when using PAR are meant to be used, revised, and shared by the communities that created them. For example, the migrant women’s groups in London are continuing to hold regular meetings and theatre workshops, while some of the researchers have put together

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8 Irving, ‘Dangerous Substances and Visible Evidence’.

9 O’Neill et al., ‘Living with the Other’.

10 Ibid.

11 ‘Safety Soap Box’.

12 O’Neill and Laing, ‘Sex Worker Rights, Recognition and Resistance: Towards a “Real Politics of Justice”’, chap. 9.

training videos so the methods can be used in other research contexts. Having the tools to train more people, and to adapt the methods to address future challenges, is part of what makes it powerful.

This past March, with the support of the Women's Studies department of UCC, I put together a symposium titled "Women Producing Media." The five speakers were women from diverse personal and professional backgrounds, including academia, publishing, podcasting, art, activism, writing, television production, and game development. I've since been working with a couple of them on media projects that tie in very well with the methods of Participatory Action Research. One of these projects includes engaging the local enterprise board, arts groups, and community organisations to set up an accessible podcasting studio. We plan to provide space and equipment and, where requested, training. We are also looking at setting up a small video studio down the line. At the foundation of all of these plans is the idea that anyone who avails of the space will acquire the skills to create media and to train others to do likewise.

### **Media Research Potential**

But none of this is being done in a vacuum. Although each of the involved parties are involved in both media creation and community engagement, we also each independently reached the conclusion that 'nothing about us without us' is the most effective way to go. Along with networking and seeking funding and resources, we are reaching out to members of under-represented groups in Cork. We're asking what some of the biggest barriers to access have been so far, what people would like to see change, and how we can help make that change happen. As our engagement with academic communities at UCC continues, we intend to build the practices, principles, and ethics of Participatory Action Research into our work.

Part of where the title of this presentation originates is from when Andrew Irving mentioned in *Dangerous Substances* the idea of an 'inner dialogue'. A private narrative, or even memory, along with the experience of walking through a three-dimensional space with all senses engaged, is the "three (or more) dimensions". It may also refer to time. Or, say, any of the emerging technology from the virtual and augmented reality sector. (The possibilities are endless.)

Participatory Action Research engenders empowerment, promotes social change, and engages the senses. It addresses the problem of moving research off the page and into the hands of those who can best implement change, often by creating innovative digital art and media. Media studies is uniquely positioned to take advantage of the creative possibilities of PAR. The people I'm working with in Cork are just a small group, but already I can see potential applications of PAR positively impacting neighbourhood arts organisations, local government, and community funding priorities. With the brainpower and creativity in this room, the potential amplification is much, much greater.

Thank you for your time.

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