The messiness of building community: Co-creation across lines of social difference

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Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba members enjoying Karoo reunion January 2020. Credit: Scott Burnett

In this blog post, we reflect on the messy interpersonal dynamics that we experienced in our CTS project. Our aim in doing so is to complicate our approach to negotiating power and ethos through participation.

We have been working with the Support Centre for Land Change (SCLC) in the natural-gas rich central plains of the South African Karoo, in a major regional town called Graaff-Reinet. Together, we have attempted to forge a 'co-creator collective' comprising young adults (18-25) from the suburbs of uMasizakhe and Kroonvale which, in a country with an ongoing spatial and socio-economic legacy of 'separate development' meant engaging as privileged white English-speaking South African scholars with Afrikaans-speaking 'Coloured' and isiXhosa-speaking 'Black African' youth (to use the old apartheid categorisations) from relatively poor and peripheralised communities.

With our backgrounds in critical race studies (Scott) and participatory arts and feminist praxis (Aylwyn), we found some value in grounding ourselves in an ethics of care, love and commitment of relating, which helped us to navigate how some of these differences affected our work.

 The project, *Ilizwi Leyaniso Lomhlaba* (the true voice of the land – named by the co-creators), introduced participants to an ambitious programme: generating the project 'brand' and strategy; film-making; interviews and social research; and creative techniques for producing a performance out of filmed materials. The impetus behind participation includes the ongoing struggle for both land and environmental justice against the backdrop of historical colonial land theft, on-going forms of race-based dispossession, and extractive capitalism in this resource-rich country. These issues are interrelated, and affect our participants across many vectors: how they live, what they imagine for the future, and how *changing the story* might operate.

Power & its impact: unanticipated ambiguities

As investigators we are both white, funded, privileged, working in universities in the European 'North', and designers of the framework of what needed to happen. Within the framework of the money and resources we were able to bring with the project, we tried to create a space for people to feel free; in the process, our co-creators realised they are not free.

These unfreedoms were profoundly challenging:

* One of our participants has a broken wheelchair, she can't get home without support: yet, project money is spent on activities more costly than an intervention that would instantly improve her quality of life;
* The group reproduces patriarchal arrangements: as soon as we leave, a group of young men is commandeering the cameras and the editing software, while the women are left to do the translations and subtitles;
* Our mature and established host partner SCLC feels they have been invaded by a horde or rowdy and disrespectful youths;
* We notice racial and class tensions emerge between Black and 'Coloured' co-creators which sometimes emerge as spatial categories (uMasizakhe/Kroonvale) and sometimes as insistences on the unintelligibility of English or Afrikaans.

Thinking through the messiness of these negotiations and dynamics is not to diminish the significance of the young people's achievements: they did an excellent job. But to what extent has being part of this project, and doing this job, contributed in a meaningful way to longer term social advancement in this area, and centred the shared goal of social justice?

When differences are not being used to dominate each other, but are instead in a productive tension, diverse groups can work together, as Audre Lorde suggests:':

> ""Within the inter-dependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring the future into being." (1993: 111)"

How could we engage with difference in a non-dominating way? Or is the domination built into the very structure of the project form we were using? The dynamic of researcher/ authority claiming access to 'authentic' data generated in the global South has been conclusively critiqued by indigenous scholars (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and feminist Global South scholars (Connell, 2015; Mohanty, 2003). In our

project, we wanted to find ways to enable youth-led co-creation and participation to identify the stories – exposing conflict perhaps, rather than ameliorating it.

In a dinner-table discussion of these dynamics, one of our participants quoted Audre Lorde's "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". Their explicit reference to the dynamic that emerges from an agenda-setting duo of Northern researchers challenged niceties about our decolonial intentions, re-staging a moment of conflict that is (supposedly) at the heart of development action research.

How, then, in light of the complexities and the continued power imbalances around language, privilege and experience, can a participatory project intervene in dynamics that might otherwise seem entrenched?

To focus on the impact in narrow terms (e.g.: 'development of technical know-how') is one way of narrating these projects, but for us, that risks erasing the messy (Hughes et al, 2011), complex and perhaps more profound change such projects can make:

- to further consider the multiple ways unequal / separate development legacies of Apartheid continue to inflect how people are able to access opportunities;
- To generate space for negotiation of power is in itself a meaningful activity, even if its outcomes are intrapersonal and more difficult to assess;
- To learn about learning, work on working and to conceive of 'progress' in the terms defined by the group itself;
- To recognise that messiness or emergence (brown, 2017) itself can be a significant form for understanding.

These might seem smaller in scale than the usual development agenda. But, given that our agenda needs to start from the realities that our relationship with the young people dictate, it was helpful to dwell on this site of learning that is by definition messy and interpersonal.

Learning about participation

Our participants' attempts to elicit 'the true voice of the land' required that our team were **given time** (Palmer et al, 2018): stories did not emerge in the timeframes set by institutional time. We needed to understand that **each person matters** (Palmer et al, 2018). Building a team of equals is challenging and requires skills development in respectful communication.

We reminded ourselves to **resist closed stories** (Palmer et al, 2018), and remain aware of the significance of **context** (Miller et al, 2017). This is also true of the story of the group itself, and not simply of their interviewees.

Building the capacity of young people who are activist-aligned requires **fostering a sense of gratitude** (brown, 2017; Palmer et al, 2018) for one another. This can be a long, ongoing journey, but it enables the chance to **build communities** (**not of sameness, but difference**) (Lorde, 1993). The development of the group and their stories is **non- linear** (brown, 2017), and relies on recognition of **interdependence** (brown, 2017; Lorde, 1993; Wiebe, 2019).

And, most of all, it requires from researchers engaged in this work the constant awareness of the super ordinance of questions of social justice: that whatever the design, and whatever the planned research 'impact', these must be subordinated to the kind of equality that can be forged from paying attention to emergent, organic, and shifting patterns of power and control.

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CHANGING THE STORY