



## **MoVE (methods: visual: explore)**

**Examining the use of participatory visual and narrative methods to explore the lived experience of migrants in Southern Africa**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore the opportunities – and challenges – associated with visual research methodologies. Drawing on the MoVE (methods: visual: explore) project that explores the lived experiences of migrant groups in southern Africa, we reflect on our experiences in exploring the visual in research. We argue that including visual and narrative methods- as part of mixed methods studies- offers researchers an important opportunity to engage in the ‘feel’ of events and the lives of the participants of such research projects. Not only do these methods provide a creative platform whereby participants can be included in the production of knowledge, they also highlight the need to consider the subjectivity of knowledge and the power inherent in the production and curation of knowledge. Visual and narrative methodologies offer an opportunity to engage in various theoretical and epistemological frameworks. Importantly, while using these methods are not without logistical and ethical challenges, participants report valuing their involvement in these projects.



Petunia's body map: Queer Crossings

## Foreword

MoVE (methods: visual: explore) focuses on the development of visual and other involved methodologies to research the lived experiences of migrants in southern Africa. Our approach aims to integrate social action with research, and involves collaboration with migrant participants, existing social movements, qualified facilitators and trainers, and research students engaged in participatory research methods (MoVE 2017). This work includes the study and use of visual methods – including photography, narrative writing, participatory theatre, collage – and other visual and narrative approaches in the process of producing, analysing, and disseminating research data. These approaches to research facilitate storytelling and self-study, incorporating various auto ethnographic approaches. Central areas of investigation link to issues of social justice in relation to migration, with a specific focus on sexuality, gender, health, and policy. In this paper, we outline our key motivations for engaging with the visual and reflect on the challenges and opportunities presented.

## Setting the Scene

Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first published in 1969, tossed mainstream discourse on its head by claiming that true knowledge and expertise already existed with the people (Saxon and Vitzthum, 2014). He claimed that ‘the people’ didn’t need “propaganda to convince them of their problems. What is required is dialogue, respect, love for humanity, and *praxis* or action and reflection to transform the world” (Saxon and Vitzthum, 2014: 1).

The belief that new methods- especially those driven by the quest to address power and knowledge- could unveil new ways of seeing the world gave rise to a variety of new research models including, ‘Participatory Research’ (PR), ‘Action Research’ (AR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). Collectively and individually, these models provide researchers who: (1) distrust knowledge that emerges solely out of conventional models of research where local priorities, processes, and perspectives are not accounted (Akua 1992, Cornwall and Jewkes 1995, Tumwine 1989); (2) who are interested in ways in which research can support the improvement of lived experiences of people and communities that are the focus of research agendas and projects (e.g. Freire 1969) and, (3) produce practical and accessible knowledge that is useful to people the their everyday lives (see Gaventa and Cornwall 2001). For advocates of these methods, the priority is that research is accessible and contributes positively in marginalised communities rather than on the sole desire to generate academic knowledge for its own sake (e.g., Gaventa and Cornwall 2001, Freire 1969, Wang and Burris 1997).



Hotstix's body map: Queer Crossings

## Making use of the Visual and Narrative Methods in Research

According to O’Neil (2002) it is through renewed methodologies such as, participatory visual methods, “that we are able to get in touch with our ‘realities’, our social worlds and the lived experiences of others, in ways which demand critical reflection” (pg. 79). Visual participatory methods are a set of practices that include visual art forms such as, photography, memory books, mapping, collage and film into the research process, where the visual ‘product’ that is created by participants *can* ‘serve as data, and may also *represent* data’ (Leavy 2009: 227). In other words, participants become involved in the coproduction of knowledge: the ‘products’ – often referred to as ‘artefacts’ – are a form of data; they tell stories, offer insights, and share ideas regarding issues pertaining to their lives. The artefacts can also represent data in different ways: they can be used alongside scholarly text to illustrate and augment experiences represented by participants themselves.

These methods do not emerge from a specific theoretical framework and therefore can be used to explore a wide range of research interests (Rose 2012). Such methods are normally incorporated into multi-method research designs when traditional methods alone are unable to access what the researcher is after (Leavy 2009). An example of this can be seen in body mapping work conducted with rural Zimbabwean women. In this study, the use of the visual method facilitated an openness whereby indigenous conceptualisations of the body were allowed to surface and as a result, important differences in relation to their bodies that were unavailable in Western models emerged (Cornwall 1992).

Mitchell (2011) argues that visual research can be used to educate people and empower communities where the interpretive process is not dependent solely on what the researcher and participant believe to be true but that the audience is also afforded an ability to engage in a process whereby they reflect on what the visual might be saying/revealing. Studies that use visual and narrative methods have explored a wide array of issues including: the role of caregivers (Mitchell 2008); the lives of migrant and asylum seeking women (Hakken and O’Neil 2014); disease surveillance and public health in war affected camps (Wickramage 2008); migrant sex workers (Oliveira and Vearey 2014, O’Neil 2009); women’s resistance to abuse (Allen 2011); childhood and belonging (Wilson and Milne 2012); and the links between urban space and public health (Venables 2011). Although epistemological underpinnings differ, many researchers and civil society activists use these methods as a way to explore lived experiences, to support solidarity initiatives and/or because they are interested in direct involvement initiatives that foster the exchange of knowledge (Leavy 2009, O’Neil 2010, Mitchell 2011). The option to share artefacts that are created during such projects often adds an additional appeal for some researchers (Leavy 2009). Technological advances, such as the Internet, offer innovative ways for research engagement and dissemination for researchers who are interested in sharing their work beyond traditional academic output avenues (see Mitchell 2011, Rose 2012).



Josco's body map: Queer Crossings



## **Research and Partnerships through Visual and Narrative Methods: MoVE**

Since 2006, some researchers- including both of us- at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS)<sup>1</sup> have begun to include participatory visual, narrative, and other arts-based approaches as part of mixed methods studies in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of migrant groups in southern Africa (Oliveira 2011, Oliveira and Vearey 2015, Schuler 2013). The decision to include a visual and/or narrative approach often stems from: (1) a desire to engage- in a more complex way- with those being researched (2) an interest to explore ways that research knowledge and outputs can be co-created between researcher(s) and participants and (3) an intention to share information produced during the research projects with wider audiences (Oliveira and Vearey 2015, Vearey et al. 2011).

In 2013, the MoVE Project was launched and is a 'home' for research projects conducted at the ACMS that make use of 'innovative methods' such as visual and narrative methods in order to explore a range of issues including migration, gender, health, and sexuality. This project was launched in order to begin to explore the efficacy of the methods and their resulting research advocacy projects (Oliveira 2015).

MoVE aims to integrate social action with research and involves collaboration with migrant participants, existing social movements, qualified facilitators and trainers, and research students engaged in participatory research methods (MoVE 2017). To date, MoVE projects have all included presumed 'hard to reach' migrant groups such as, sex workers, informal traders, refugees, and LGBTIQ asylum seekers, to name a few. These projects aim to co-produce knowledge and support social justice initiatives through partnerships with migrant groups, especially those that are currently under-represented in research, policy, and public debates. These partnerships have culminated in a range of outputs, including community-based exhibitions, public exhibitions, and engagement with officials (Oliveira and Vearey 2014). In addition to peer-reviewed journals, MoVE outputs continue to appear in a range of reports, mainstream media publications, and in popular media (Oliveira 2011b, 2015, Oliveira and Lety, 2012, Oliveira and Vearey 2015, Vearey et al 2011).

## **Special Attention Required when Using Participatory Visual and Narrative Methods**

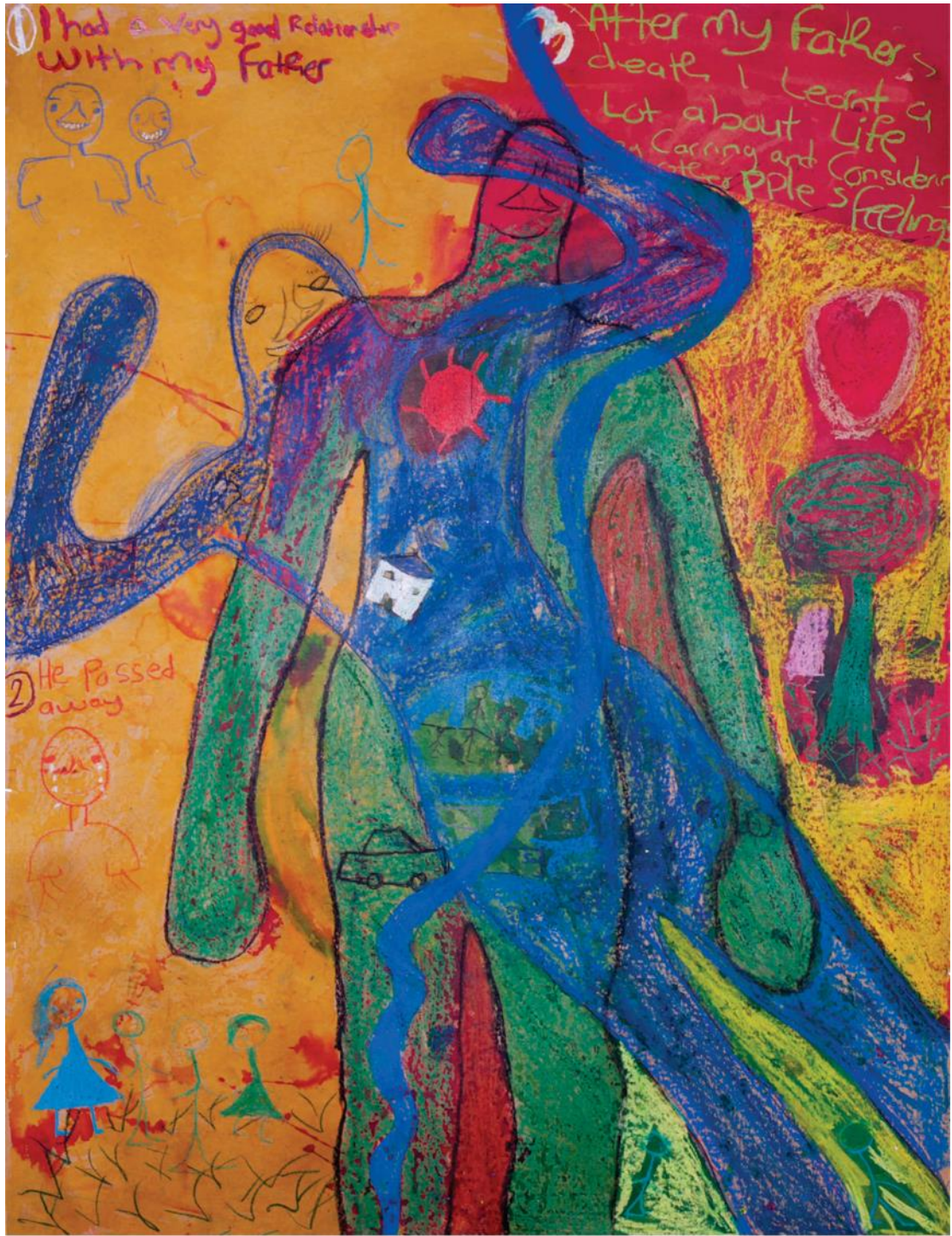
Contemporary researchers that use participatory visual methods have also begun to critically engage with the claims that many make regarding the efficacy of these methods by calling for increased attention to issues of power (Fink 2012, Manny 2010). Claims that these methods allow researchers to work alongside participants and communities- thereby offering deeper understandings into the lived experiences of so-called 'hard to reach' marginalised people who would otherwise not be included, or who might not elect to participate in other

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<sup>1</sup> for research, teaching and outreach on migration: <http://www.migration.org.za>

traditional social science methods- is a simplistic reading of the opportunities and challenges presented by participatory visual approaches (Manny 2010). Fick (2012) addresses concerns of inclusivity and 'voice' during her research that sought to explore how economic exclusion might shape participation. In her research, participants often 'went along' with what they believed the research team wanted to hear and see. We have also highlighted how issues of power surfaced during a participatory photo project with migrant sex workers (Oliveira and Vearey 2014). During the qualitative narrative interview phase of the study, negotiations of power between participants and the research team were made evident. We believe that the inclusion of mixed methods approaches can help researchers avoid the pitfalls of misinterpreting and misrepresenting the artefacts produced during a project that applies a solely visual approach.

Concerns regarding anonymity, especially when using visual methods such as photography, continue to be addressed across disciplines. The use of photography has been criticised as a tool of voyeurism (Kihato 2009), surveillance (Prins 2010) and exploitation (Lomax 2012). These issues are especially important to consider when working with groups of people that are highly stigmatised, marginalised, and/or who could suffer negative consequences if they and their occupied space were made visible (Kihato 2010). Vearey (2010) insists that researchers must be cautious when using visual methodologies, emphasising the need for careful consideration when making individuals of 'hidden spaces' and their communities visible (pg. 51). Kihato (2010) engages us to consider the camera as a 'disempowering tool' given the possible dangers of making migrant women's lives visible (pg.14). While participant artefacts offer a range of audiences an opportunity to engage in new ways researchers must be attentive to the final public works that are selected by participants, especially when working with criminalised groups, such as sex workers. In these cases, researchers and activists are encouraged to work closely with participants in order to ensure that information they select for public use does not include identifiable places of work, people, or other information that could be used negatively against them and/or their communities (Oliveira 2016).



Shane's body map: Queer Crossings

## Conclusion

We believe that including visual and narrative methods- as part of mixed methods studies- offers researchers an important opportunity to engage in the ‘feel’ of events and the lives of the participants of such research projects. Not only do these methods provide a creative platform whereby participants can be included in the production of knowledge, they also highlight the need to consider the subjectivity of knowledge and the power inherent in the production and curation of knowledge. Visual and narrative methodologies offer an opportunity to engage in various theoretical and epistemological frameworks. Importantly, while using these methods are not without logistical and ethical challenges, participants report valuing their involvement in these projects.

Tendai, a migrant woman from Zimbabwe that participated in the 2013 Volume 44 Project<sup>2</sup> stated,

*Through the workshops I have been able to share my stories. My family doesn't even know some of these stories about all of these things that happened to me. In the workshops, I can share my thoughts and experiences and people listened. I could express myself and what happened to me and even though some of the things were not good I could tell them and let go of them. While I learned many skills that help me like writing and photography and story telling I also healed a lot during the workshops.*

Visual methodologies provide important opportunities relating to ways of facilitating knowledge (evidence) sharing, and in supporting the uptake of knowledge by key stakeholders in order to support the development of appropriate policies and programmes (Oliveira and Vearey, 2017).

For example, the *Izwi Lethu: Our Voices*<sup>3</sup> project facilitates engagement with a diverse network of pro-sex work activists and allies, and with policy makers and politicians (Schuler, Oliveira and Vearey 2016; Oliveira and Vearey 2017). The project involves a regular newsletter produced by sex worker reporters that shares their own lived experiences- and of others that they interview- in ways that are accessible to a non-specialist (non-academic) audience. The newsletter is available online but is also distributed in print form at public events, parliamentary hearings and policy dialogues.

Like the *Izwi Lethu: Our Voices* project, MoVE exhibitions continue to be showcased extensively in South Africa and beyond. The collective MoVE outputs offer examples of visual and narrative collaborations and showcase stories participants' have created intentionally for public engagement, thereby offering those witnessing their creations an important and rare opportunity to reflect and consider the messages they aim to share. Although MoVE exhibitions represent only a fragment of the information inherent in such

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<sup>2</sup> Volume 44 is a participatory project undertaken with migrant men, women and transgender sex workers living and working in South Africa. The project worked with 19 internal and cross border migrants from Zimbabwe who were selling sex in inner-city Johannesburg and in rural areas in the Limpopo Province.  
<http://www.migration.org.za/page/about-vol44/move>

<sup>3</sup> <https://goo.gl/dgU9Wj>

research undertakings, requests for ongoing engagement by participants and stakeholders, including requests to exhibit works in multiple platforms, highlight the need to expand accessibility and to scrutinise how knowledge is produced and to what degree it reflects the lives, needs, and concerns of those under investigation.

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