

Practical guides for participatory methods

Body mapping

Purpose

Body mapping may be useful for practitioners and researchers who want to:

- Examine and appreciate how emotions, cultural norms or practices relate to (specific parts of) physical bodies, or are embodied.
- Explore topics that people find difficult to express verbally.
- Build trust in groups.

Things to consider

- The method is very suitable for discussing or exploring sensitive or unfamiliar topics.
- Participants should decide who they want to share with at their own pace.
- It is not important to be able to draw or be artistic.
- Include materials or techniques that participants know, or like.
- Store the images in a safe space until people are ready to share.
- Use small groups of 6-10 participants, maximum 12.
- Put underlay on the floor or pick a floor that can be messy.

Practical steps

1. Divide participants in pairs. Each person gets a sheet of paper that is large enough to cover their body. Each person gets a few pencils or markers.
2. Keep a pile with many pencils, markers, chalk, paint and decorations in a central place for group use.
3. Invite people to lay down on the paper in a position they like and ask the other person to draw a line around their body.
4. Each pair discusses why they took a certain position, and what it means.

5. Depending on the research question invite people to visualise this on their body with questions that guide them, for example, “draw happiness on your body, or fear”. “How does it feel to be diagnosed with a certain disease?” “or how does it feel becoming a father, or godmother?” The method can help with many topics.
6. Share the pictures with the group, then perhaps rotate and create new pairs. Deepen the questions and draw more details or write down ideas on post-its that can be stuck on the body map.
7. Each person in each pair presents the other’s drawing and their experiences, to promote active listening.
8. Invite each person to draw and add what they like to their body. This can be to make it beautiful, but it can also be a body covered in symbols. It is about expressing oneself.
9. Variations: you could include dividing up the body where each body part visualises one part of an identity (for example, mother, daughter, factory worker, Indonesian).
10. Sharing in public- there are many ways to present or disseminate outside the group. This depends on what the group wants. It is possible to print the images. It is also possible to make metal frames in the shapes of the bodies where the images are framed, or to create a group composition on a wall to answer different kinds of questions.



Related resources

This method has been used a lot in sexual and reproductive health including discussions of sexual violence experienced by LGBT+ people, and the meaning of motherhood by women living with HIV. It has also been used to discuss the multiple roles women or men perform and how each of these roles uses or requires different parts or functions of the body. Find out more:

- Angela Santamaria: Transitional ethnic female bodies and kaleidoscopic methodologies: Participatory research, feminist geographies, and multi-sited ethnography in: Burns, D., Howard, J., & Ospina, S. M. (2021). The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry, chapter 67
- Tu-Anh Hoang Mixed participatory and formal methods in studying violence towards men who have sex with men in Viet Nam in: Burns, D., Howard, J., & Ospina, S. M. (2021). The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry, chapter 66

Credits and other information:

This guide was authored by Pauline Oosterhoff.

DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2023.004](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2023.004)

Please email participate@ids.ac.uk with any feedback you may have, including examples where you have used this method in practice. For more information on participatory methods, please visit participatorymethods.org where you can also find an electronic copy of this guide.

Icons: “[footprints](#)” icon by alya nafisa, “[Magnifying Glass](#)” icon by B. Agustín Amenábar Larraín, “[books](#)” icon by Jakub Čaja, “[Thinking](#)” icon by VINZENCE STUDIO and “[Question](#)” by Davo Sime from Noun Project (Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/))