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Murals as a tool for action research

Rebecca Yeo

'It was so good what we did together. All of us disabled people. We will never forget. We can't ever forget because we have proof, there it is what we did' (Disabled asylum seeker speaking after completion of mural as part of research project, cited in Yeo and Bolton 2013).

Introduction

Previous chapters have considered research about murals. This final chapter considers murals as tools for research. The focus is on a lottery funded project that I coordinated working with disabled people living in a wide variety of different circumstances in the UK (2013) and the project on which it was based, working with disabled people in Bolivia (2007). In each place, people created murals depicting their key messages in the form of visual imagery. The murals served as a tool for bringing people together, eliciting information, promoting research findings and enabling a power shift, such that those traditionally conceived of as research 'subjects' have control and sense of ownership of the research output. This chapter focusses on the research design, rationale and impact of the work. For details of the research findings the reader is referred to Yeo, R and Bolton, A. (2013 and 2007), from which the research citations are taken. Due to space limitations, only a small number of images are reproduced in this chapter. For more images the reader is referred to the publications and the website of the UK project: www.disabilitymurals.org.uk.

The epistemological context of murals as research tools

This work should be seen in the context of the wider field of visual research methods. The use of such methods as theorised means of formal research only recently gained academic status with several publications since the start of the 21st century, including work by Sarah Pink (2012), Maggie O'Neill (2010), Patricia Leavy (2009), David Gauntlett 2007, Gillian Rose (2007) and Marcus Banks (2001). Even now, the use of such methods in research is often labelled as 'innovative', as if imagery is something new and radical. Yet the use of maps, symbols and pictures stems from at least as long ago as cave painting. Images serve to express and communicate ideas in ways distinct from words. As Edward Hopper put it, 'if you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint' (cited by Leavy 2009, 220). Images can also serve to bring up new ideas. As Jung suggested, 'spending time with attention focused on creative activities gives us an opportunity to reach down into the ocean and bring up some significant truths' (cited by Gauntlett 2007, 79). In addition, the frequent inclusion of community art as a requirement of urban development suggests acceptance of art as a tool for building cohesive communities (see for example Lowe 2000, Congdon 2004, Kelly 1984). The core attributes of these functions of visual methods or art based interventions relate closely to the rationale for the use of murals: providing an accessible means of communication, encouraging new insights and building awareness of individual and collective experience.

On a more theoretical level, the shift in the academic acceptance of visual methods may stem from epistemological developments. Positivist research paradigms, in which academic researchers are positioned as ‘experts’ in search of ‘truth’, may not easily equate with the use of imagery. There may be an easier fit with more recent constructivist paradigms in which the ‘subjects’ of research are positioned as ‘active creators and shapers of the research process’ (Banks 2001, 45). This is particularly relevant for work with marginalized people. Disabled academics such as Michael Oliver (1992) have argued that traditional research relationships actively reinforce positions of subjugation. The growth of rights-based agendas led to pressure to treat people as research partners rather than ‘subjects’ of investigation.

The study on which this chapter is based fits broadly within what Reason and Bradbury (2001, xxii) define as a ‘family of approaches’ including ‘action research’ with reflexive, participatory or emancipatory ambitions. The broad aim is not just increasing knowledge but also contributing to social change, or as Danieli and Woodhams (2007, 284) put it, bringing ‘benefit to oppressed people’. More specifically, this study combines elements of action research and what Maggie O’Neill and Mark Webster describe as creative consultation (2005). Such consultation ‘engages with the imagination and prompts individuals and communities to move out of old, rigid ways of doing things and look for new solutions. It is fundamentally about change’ (ibid).

Before considering more specific rationale of the mural research design, it is necessary to understand the methodology in more depth.

The mural creation process

In the UK based project, disabled people with specific lived experiences in common (such as asylum seekers, ex-service personnel, parents, people living in residential accommodation) worked together with artist Andrew Bolton to create a mural depicting their key messages. The murals were sited in public spaces in Bristol, London, Norwich and Frome, Somerset.

Image 1: The finished murals

Key elements of the research process deserve further consideration:

A. Preparation

Mural sites were sought with walls that were both accessible to those creating the murals and where many people would pass on a regular basis. Finding such sites can be difficult and time-consuming, however, the process of asking local people for advice serves an initial communication role, alerting the wider community to the research and furthering interest in the findings for a later stage. At the same time, disabled people with key experiences were found and invited to be involved.

B. Data Collection

The images

The data gathering process began with traditional focus groups and semi-structured interviews. People were then immediately invited to put their key messages into drawings, models or photographic images. As suggested by the citation from Jung above, it was found that the process of ‘showing’ rather than just ‘telling’ often results in new insights or clarity.

Some community art projects involve each person being given a separate ‘part’ of a ‘whole’ created by a professional artist. In contrast, in this project, people’s ideas were combined, conveying the similarities and differences of lived experiences within a greater whole. In this way, the ‘whole’ becomes greater than the sum of the parts. The facilitating artist created a design in close consultation with the group. Each mural was intended to encapsulate elements of everybody’s images or ideas while also ensuring a finished product with intellectual and aesthetic coherence. Sometimes, elements of several people’s ideas were combined into a new image. If one person’s image was felt to be distinct from others, or if it encapsulated others’ ideas, then an individual’s complete drawing was reproduced. The intention was to discuss and convey the commonalities and differences among people with some level of shared lived experiences.

More traditional semi-structured interviews were also carried out with policy makers and service providers. These were framed around the issues raised by the disabled people working on the murals.

The painting

The painting was done collaboratively with the research artist adapting the process to enable meaningful contributions according to different people’s skills and preferences while also ensuring a professional finished product. One person with a visual impairment painted onto sections of board cut to the shape she needed. Her sections were then attached to the larger mural, making a raised tactile edge. People were able to work on the sections they chose, at the level most accessible to their needs.

Image 2: The process of mural creation

Communication and Advocacy

Opening event

In each location, an official opening event was held. People involved in creating the murals were able to invite those whom they would most like to see the finished artwork and to understand its meaning. Audiences generally included: families, friends, service providers, local representatives as well as the general public. The events were a chance for people who are often labelled as recipients or beneficiaries, to control the agenda. The mural was a tool with which people could present themselves, their contribution to the community and their key messages to an attentive audience.

Exhibitions

The artwork was reproduced onto large screens, creating a portable exhibition to take the messages more directly to relevant people who may not see the murals in their original public setting. Venues included the Houses of Parliament, academic conferences, the TUC disabled workers conference and the Guardian newspaper.

Image 3: Exhibitions

The research findings were also promoted through the use of short films, a website and social media. The more detailed findings were published by Leeds disability press: 'Real lives on the wall. Disabled people use public murals to convey the reality of their lives in the UK'. The research report combines text with reproductions of the visual images.

Before considering the impact of this use of murals in more detail, the rationale for these methods should be considered.

Rationale for using this methodology

The methodology is designed to privilege what Patricia Hill Collins terms the unique 'ways of knowing' (1990) associated with lived experience. Those involved in creating the murals had high levels of control of the final product, and thus of the manner in which their identities, perspectives and messages are promoted in a public space. Furthermore, the murals themselves were a physical means for marginalized people to claim a space in their communities.

The emphasis on accessibility serves in part to overcome problems associated with research which labels certain people as 'hard to reach', and which creates outputs exclusively in the form of reports that are neither accessible to, nor endorsed by, the research 'subjects' (O'Neill and Webster 2005). The mural creation process is intended to be accessible to those involved, and the final product is intended to report the key research findings in a publicly accessible manner, encouraging consideration of the existence and needs of the people who created it. The action research character of the methodology is reflected in the fact that communication and advocacy goals are integral to each stage of the process locating mural sites, painting on the walls, mural opening events, films and exhibitions. The rationale can be further elaborated in terms of the impact on those involved in creating, as well as on those viewing the murals.

Impact of murals

The work can be considered to have two broad and overlapping objectives: a) developing ideas; and b) encouraging change.

Developing ideas

This work does not set out to gather 'facts', rather to exchange and develop ideas among all those involved in the research process. Indeed, the information conveyed by visual representation cannot be equated to 'facts' alone. As one person put it, each

mural “represents a lot of emotion and real lives ... It's not just looking at it like oh, there's a picture of someone. ... It's the emotion behind it, not just what you can see”. This relates to the earlier citation from Hopper regarding the distinctiveness of imagery.

The development of ideas in this project may not be directly attributable to the mural, rather to the process of prolonged thinking, exchanging ideas and considering means of creative representation. Whatever the cause, ideas did develop quite radically during the creative process. One person first described her message as being about suicide; by the end, her focus was on the need to protect the rights of service users. People's ideas were influenced by each other and by their own internal processes. The creativity and social interaction in the process facilitated the development of ideas in terms of previous experiences, hopes for the future and a more general sense of identity. People learned of the commonalities and differences in each other's lives. An ex-serviceman explained how he had learned from people from different backgrounds and cultures, which had given him “a feeling of solidarity ... [I] feel part of a wider movement, national and international”. For him, the sense of solidarity led to a greater sense of possibility that was reflected in ideas and more practical change.

Individual and collective change

Social research is often related to aspirations for change. In some work, the intended change is expected to result from the research findings whereas the action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001) approach of this project has explicit aspirations that the process itself contributes to change. People involved in this work described multiple benefits from this project. One person contrasted their experiences with other research projects in which “you give all this information but you don't get anything back”. The very tangible nature of the mural is a visible manifestation of what people perceived they were ‘getting back’. In addition, there are many wider aspects of change, directly or indirectly attributable to the mural, all of which contribute to the commitment of time and energy necessary to complete the project.

At an individual level, the process of bringing people together to work on a collective goal is intended to encourage a sense of purpose and achievement on its completion. The visible progression of the mural, from a blank wall to an attractive artwork conveying people's messages to those in power, encouraged a sense of possibility. As O'Neill and Webster (2005, p.20) put it, ‘by engaging with the imagination people see there is another way of doing things and suddenly the impossible becomes possible’. The work had social impact for some of the individuals involved. The sense of isolation common to people living in marginalized positions was reduced by working with and getting to know people in similar situations. A mental health service user described how, “through the mural I met lovely people ... it's like counselling”. Or, as a disabled asylum seeker explained at the mural opening event, “I am happy right now ... I'm not feeling alone”. Such peer support is crucial in addressing isolation, but also in exchanging ideas and possible solutions. In addition, and not to be underestimated, is the importance of making the project a relaxed enjoyable process. This may seem irrelevant to the serious business of academic research, but, according to David

Gauntlett (2007), a major factor in the success of visual methods appears to be the extended time for informal reflection. He values the insights arising from casual conversation during periods of collective creativity, which he contrasts with the 'relatively formal contexts of an interview or focus group, where there is a tendency to artificial kind of talk' (2007, p.97 building on the findings of Peter Dahlgren 1988). Gauntlett (2007) observes that relaxed interactions help the researcher to 'better understand people's identities and social experiences' (2007, 2). Furthermore, if people are giving up their time for this work, it is important that it feels enjoyable and worthwhile for them.

At a wider societal level, the public locations of the murals enabled those involved to claim a space in their communities through which to assert their existence and needs. It is important that the murals are finished to a professional standard in order that they are generally perceived as a positive contribution to the public space. The aim is for the murals to generate some level of collective ownership in the community. Echoing the contribution of murals to the heritage of a neighbourhood, as discussed in previous chapters, a passer-by explained that she would "be very proud to show people when they come to town". This collective pride is symbolic of the collective nature of the messages conveyed. A particular image within a mural may stem from a single person's idea or may be an amalgamation of several people's ideas. In either case, the point is not whose idea it was, nor how prevalent it is, but that the issue exists within the community. The intention is that in this way, some responsibility for addressing the problems conveyed is taken from the individual to the wider community. As one passer-by explained, the mural "makes me appreciate and feel sad about the place I live in at the same time. Great that the artwork is there, but terrible that people live like this". Or as another passer-by put it, "It has opened me up, made me think". The mural encourages far greater consideration of the research messages than would be possible from a written report alone. According to an ex-serviceman, it works: "I walk past that mural maybe four or five times a week. Every time I walk past, there's at least two or three, sometimes more, people stood in front of it, talking about it". Some people were then motivated to take action. As one person put it, the knowledge that, "there are people being unfairly treated on my doorstep, has driven me to want to go out there and do something".

Figure 4: people observing the mural

Murals created with severely marginalised people, where little information is publicly available, serve a particularly important communication function. The deprivation and segregation described by disabled asylum seekers is rarely acknowledged by the wider population (Yeo 2015). Yet, the mural depicting the lived experiences of disabled asylum seekers stimulated passers-by to remark on unexpected commonalities. As one person put it, "I didn't realise it was about disabled asylum seekers at first. Actually it's about much more than that. That fence is there for most of us, just to different degrees". Or as another passer-by expressed, "I can identify with all the different characters on there". The work highlights the similarities between the lived

experiences of the most marginalised and the wider population. Passers-by are not expected to understand other people's lives through looking at a mural, the intention is to be thought-provoking. One passer-by explained, "Words cannot express my feelings. It blows your thoughts and feelings away. It will keep me thinking for ages". The issue of interpretation of images for academic analysis and for advocacy purposes requires further consideration. The impact of the images will not be the same for each person who sees them. What is important is not a single understanding but the contribution to public discourse. This relates to Michael Krausz's (2002) conception of multiplism. In a similar vein to Fairclough regarding verbal language (1997), Krausz argues that the viewer's interpretation of an image is always influenced by their own experiences and perspectives and is therefore necessarily somewhat different from that of the artist / creator. The only feasible aim of imagery with regard to communication, like with verbal language, is to contribute to a dialogue. If installed in busy locations, murals can make this dialogue public in a manner unlikely to be achieved by a written report alone. The murals serve as an on-going public reminder of the existence of those who created them, as well as of the messages conveyed. A County Councilor explained the importance for her,

"It is very important that those issues were brought up. I do not automatically think disabled access when I plan an event or consider how something will impact on people with learning difficulties or physical access problems. It does need to keep being brought to our notice."

The public nature of the murals serves as an advertisement for these issues. Through the murals, some of the most marginalised people gained the opportunity to address large numbers of people, including those in positions of power. The exhibition opening event at the Houses of Parliament in London, was attended by members of both Houses, including the then Minister for Disabled People, Esther Mcvey MP. As one of the mural creators put it, "It was one amazing day. I was very proud". The experience gave people the strength to assert their rights: "through the mural it has given me confidence and encouragement to know how to fight back".

The nature of impact is notoriously difficult to measure (see for example Reeves 2002). Change in feelings or ideas is rarely measurable nor is it the result of a single intervention. One person believed that the mural "changed so much. It's magical. It's all to do with the mural. [...] Everyone's responding positively. It's had a huge impact. People are realising that services don't fit. This project was the tipping point". It is not the mural itself that changed things, but people's reaction to the mural which can be assumed to have been influenced by a number of different factors. The murals are considered to have contributed to a process of change as outlined above.

Limitations

Having outlined some of the many benefits of using murals as a research tool in terms of gathering information and contributing to social change, it is important to also acknowledge their limitations. Perhaps most obviously, visual imagery is not ideally suited to the involvement of people with visual impairments. Verbal or tactile elements can be included in projects, but this does not eliminate access barriers. Nonetheless,

participatory modes of working using visual methods may still be more accessible than more traditional academic research in which the 'researched' have less control over the research outputs. A risk of using imagery is that the focus may be influenced by what can be visually conveyed. Marcus Banks (2001) believes that while it is 'relatively straightforward to create or select a visual image that illustrates a material object, it is much more difficult to create or select a visual image that illustrates an abstraction such as "society" or "kinship" or "unemployment"' (2001, 18). The complexity of an issue may be obscured if communication relies on imagery. Banks goes on to describe the 'dissonance between an individual's very real experience of - say - unemployment, and a photograph of the unemployed individual' (2001, 18). Such limitations can, however, also be applied to the more traditional academic reliance on words. The solution may be to combine imagery and words as appropriate to the concepts to be conveyed.

Conclusion

This action research methodology using murals is considered an effective means of research as well as a tool for social change. The value of murals as research tools may not however stem from anything intrinsic to the art, but from associated elements such as: the facilitation of prolonged reflective, collaborative approach to data gathering; the sense of possibility and pride generated by creating something impressive for public display; and the equalising of researcher - researched power relations in comparison with many more traditional research approaches. The work has particular value for use with marginalised people. As O'Neill and Webster put it, the process quite literally enables those involved to make their 'experiences visible' (2005). Whether or not the use of murals is appropriate to a study must depend on specific research goals. What is clear is that it would be beneficial to remove the 'innovative' label and bring visual methods, including murals into the array of options conventionally at a researcher's disposal. Recognition of the value of such methods in research would bring academia in line with what has been commonly accepted in the fields of communication, psychology and community cohesion and has been used since at least the time of cave painting. It could enable research audiences to more easily 'see' what is meant.

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