The use of arts-based methods in community-based research with vulnerable populations: Protocol for a scoping review

Sara Coemans a,*, Qingchun Wang a, Joyce Leysen b, Karin Hannes a

a Methodology of Educational Sciences Research Group, Laboratory for Education, Culture and Society, KU Leuven, Belgium
b Laboratory for Education, Culture and Society, KU Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT

In the last couple of years we have witnessed a growing body of published articles featuring arts-based research methods. However, a shared vocabulary concerning this type of studies is lacking. This protocol outlines a procedure to systematically map and categorize the characteristics of community-based research projects using arts-based methods. It provides insights in our search strategy, our in- and exclusion criteria and the methodological choices we have made. The final review will help us to understand how arts-based methods are currently defined and applied in research practice within the broad field of humanities. We invite colleague researchers to comment on the protocol or to get involved in our review project.

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Recently, there has been an increasing interest in the use of arts-based methods as a research approach. The use of arts-based research (ABR) methods as an approach to scientific inquiry originally grew out of the practice of creative arts therapy, in which artistic methods were used alongside therapeutic techniques to help people cope with their life situation (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010; McNiff, 2008).

In the last two decades, researchers from other disciplines have successfully adopted ABR methods in their research inquiries: first, in artistic and design research (e.g. Hannula, Suoranta, & Vaden, 2005); and second, in the broad field of humanities including social and cultural sciences, public health and educational sciences (Brazg, Bekemeier, Spigner, & Huebner, 2010; Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Hornsby-Miner, 2007).

However, a shared vocabulary that can facilitate the communication about what constitutes ABR appears to be lacking. In an attempt to contribute to this debate, we will conduct a scoping review to synthesize the literature on the use of ABR methods in the area of community-based research, inspired by a social pedagogical lens to inquiry, hereby cutting across disciplines such as sociology, social welfare, criminology and educational sciences. More specifically, we target research studies that apply artistic methods to promote community change.

The aim of this review project is: (1) to provide an overview of the use of arts-based research methods over a 20-year timespan, in the area of community-based research, (2) to assist researchers in deciding on appropriate definitions and methods for their research needs.
applications in their own use of ABR, by giving them a firm grasp of how arts based methods are currently described, used, and compare to each other, and (3) to promote best practices by formulating recommendations on how art and research can be better integrated in the broad field of the humanities.

1. Background

1.1. Conceptualizing ABR

ABR can be defined as "a research method in which the arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research method. Art forms [...] are essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analyzing data, and presenting the research results." (Austin & Forinash, 2005, pp. 458–459).

There is a large variety of artistic methods and artistic ways of representation. Examples include visual methods (e.g. photography, collages, murals, carving, quilting and painting), narrative methods (e.g. poetry, fiction, novel) and performative methods (e.g. film-making, theater, dance).

Traditionally, ABR methods have been applied either as a data collection technique or as a dissemination technique. In the first case, the art forms are considered research data in their own right. Images, sculptures or collages replace the traditional interview excerpts or observational data or support the interpretation process of the researcher. In this case, art is used as a medium that allows research participants to ‘communicate’ with researchers about their situation, experiences, concerns, challenges or obstacles in daily life. In the second case, ABR methods are used as a medium to translate an outcome of a particular research project, replacing a traditional research report and moving away from the traditional focus on textual accounts of phenomena under investigation (Foster, 2012). In this case, the art form is considered the vehicle for dissemination of research findings. The findings may present themselves as a drama or dance performance, exhibition of images or visual representation, an artifact or a collage (Bach, 1998; Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Gray et al., 2000; Harrington & Schibik, 2003; Saldana, 2003).

Researchers using ABR methods are often situated within the qualitative research tradition that questions the triumphs of science and rationality (Bentz & Shapiro, as cited in Butterwick, 2002). They are motivated to challenge our conventions and assumptions about what constitutes research. Not surprisingly, the whole debate on the place and role of ABR methods in scientific and academic inquiry has been fueled by paradigm shifts, such as the emergence of the postmodern period welcoming a more pluralistic attitude toward research (Leavy, 2009).

In line with other qualitative research traditions, ABR projects have been assigned many good qualities, not in the least the fact that they open up a space for experimentation. In seeking other ways of interpreting the world, researchers can create “vivid realities that would otherwise go unknown” (Eissner, 2008, p. 11). Researchers engaging with ABR methods often claim that, to some extent, the uncomfortable marriage between art and social inquiry allows them to closely connect with “the realms of local, personal, everyday places and events” (Finley, 2008, p. 71). In doing so, it removes academics from their ivory towers. Moreover, the use of ABR methods encourages them to produce a less tangible knowledge, to explore the nuances of lived experiences and to foster dialog, rather than providing direct answers (Foster, 2012). As a result, these methods can provide us with “an amazing array of possibilities for creative research work: new fields of study, new things about which to inquire, new methods of inquiry, new ways of combining knowledge of different fields, new ways to incorporate yourself and your social background into your research, new technologies to play with, and new social relationships with peers” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 3, as cited in Butterwick, 2002).

1.2. Introducing our review case

The proposed review project will address ABR projects in the area of community-based research targeting vulnerable populations. The choice to focus on community-based research is inspired by the fact that many of the researchers working in this field are trained in the use of creative and artistic methods, to unlock the potential of the often vulnerable populations they work with. One of the main reasons why ABR methods have been picked up by researchers in the field of community-based research, and humanities more generally, is the fact that traditional research methods have not always been able to fully engage with particular groups in society. This is certainly the case for vulnerable people, for instance those who have limited language abilities or those who suffered major trauma’s or severe life circumstances (Cosenza, 2010; Mullen, Buttignol, & Diamond, 2005). These people are harder to reach, but also less able to raise their voice.

ABR methods may be able to overcome at least a fraction of these problems, by reducing the focus on the written word and looking at other means of communication, not only to gain access to deeper layers of meaning, but also to address power relations in research processes (Foster, 2012). In many ABR projects participants are invited to play a more active role in the research process (Purcell, 2009). The participants may feel empowered due to their own participation in the artistic process. They are in control. According to Foster (2012), this would increase the likelihood that we can access fundamental aspects of human experience like power, fear, loss, desire, hope or suffering and this transforms ABR into an important tool to facilitate community inclusion in social investigation (Finley, 2005). In addition, the use of artistic elements in participatory research processes can foster a process of critical reflection, where community members learn to see ‘private troubles as public issues’ (Purcell, 2009) and create ideas for their own lives and the community. Very often, this induces community action and community change. As Thiele and Marsden (2003, p. 89) conclude: “Using arts in the community is about ‘building
connectedness, social trust and social cohesion. It is about finding a voice and the expression of ideas to people, negotiating and re-negotiating personal understandings, to find their own sense of reality within a collaborative context.”

1.3. Researchers’ lens

In order to manage the number of articles entering the analytical process and in an attempt to control the review process in terms of resources and manpower, we will adopt a disciplinary lens to inquiry: social pedagogy. We consider social pedagogy as a multi-face field of theory and practice dealing with social and educational processes, problems and activities. It aims to alleviate social exclusion and deals with the processes of human growth that tie people to the systems, institutions and communities important to their well-being and life management. Therefore, it refers to a discipline necessarily located between social and educational sciences (Hämäläinen, 2005). This lens will guide us into deciding on the disciplinary boundaries for this review project. It will influence our inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined for this review as well as our selection of relevant articles.

2. Methods

2.1. Objectives and research questions

As more researchers become interested in using ABR methods, more overviews of the literature have become available. Pain (2012) reviewed the literature on the use of visual methods in a wide range of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, geography and health care, focusing on articles featuring visual research methods only. Fraser and Al Sayah (2011) and Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang, and Stasiulis (2012) reviewed the literature on the use of ABR methods in health care. A review from Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardoshi, and Pula (2009) assessed the use of ABR methods in community-based participatory research, but only focused on photovoice as one visual research technique applied to health and disability topics. Our review project differs from these projects, first of all by taking a social pedagogical lens to inquiry that defines the disciplinary boundaries for the review and secondly, by including a broad variety of different ABR methods and techniques. This allows us to cross-compare our findings with similar reviews conducted in e.g. the field of health care. We believe that it is the subtle variation in the degree of process and rigor within the various ABR types applied that remains largely unacknowledged and under researched. Such variations are most clearly evidenced in the techniques and methods that distinguish one ABR type from another.

The objective of this review is to provide a descriptive insight into the most common examples of ABR projects in community-based research. We will determine the prevalent terminology associated with ABR. From this, common ABR methods and their key characteristics will be identified and mapped. A secondary goal of this review project is to use this information to contribute to the further development of a shared vocabulary on ABR.

This review project will be guided by the following research questions:

- What are the given rationales for using ABR methods in working with vulnerable populations in community based research?
- What type of artistic methods are used in community-based research?
- How do the authors describe ABR methods?
- What do the authors describe as the added value and limitations of these ABR methods?

2.2. Search strategy

We developed a search strategy in collaboration with an information retrieval specialist employed within our university. Comprehensive literature searches will be conducted in databases that cover the broad fields of social sciences and education. The following electronic databases will be systematically searched: ERIC, Francis, Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Sociological Abstracts (SA) and Social Services Abstracts (SSA). Relevant theses and dissertations will be included in the review. For practical reasons the studies have to be written in English, French, German or Dutch. Moreover, the studies need to be published between 1993 and 2013. Our choice to limit our time span to 20 years is motivated by the fact that the term ABR was officially launched by Barone and Eisner in the year 1993 (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

2.3. Search terms

A comprehensive set of keywords will be used in the different databases. The full search strategy can be retrieved online from: http://ppw.kuleuven.be/home/english/research/mesrg/documents/paper-supplements/paper-supplements-sara-coemans/supplementary-file-1.doc.

The first search string will consist of terms that allow us to characterize the concept of ABR methods. Studies that are considered relevant for inclusion should employ a method that meets our definition of ABR (Austin & Forinash, 2005). We
will not only include articles that promote their work as ABR but also those written by researchers that do not categorize their work as arts-based, but feature techniques or methods that correspond to our definition. We will use methodological keywords such as “Arts Based Research”, “Arts Informed Research” or “Visual Research” combined with specific art genres that are used in research, including for example “performance”, “dance” and “photography”. The second search string will relate to terms that capture the vulnerable population we are interested in. The third search string will represent the research setting under review. An example of the type of search strings developed can be found in Table 1.

2.4. Study inclusion and exclusion criteria

2.4.1. Study types
We will only select qualitative primary research articles for inclusion. This idea is mainly inspired by a preliminary scoping exercise that revealed that most quantitative studies portrayed the role of the researcher as an ‘outsider’ to the community-based research process instead of an ‘insider’ with an active role. We expected little benefit from including studies in which the role of the researcher was limited to evaluation. We expect that such studies will give us little or no insight in the characteristics we are interested in (see paragraph on data-extraction and synthesis). We will also exclude reviews, theoretical, opinion and methodological papers.

2.4.2. Interest
As mentioned above, the included articles have to feature an artistic element in at least one of the phases in the research process. To specify this, we introduce a distinction between ‘art in research’, ‘art as research’ and ‘research about art’, based on our own typology of ABR in development (Wang, Coemans, & Hannes, 2014). We refer to ‘art in research’ when art is used as research method or dissemination technique, and there is an active involvement of the researchers in the process of art-making and/or in the guiding of research participants in the artistic research process. Articles that meet this definition will be included in our search. We refer to ‘art as research’ when the aim of the researcher is to gain more insights in a phenomenon through the study of the artistic process the researcher is undergoing, e.g. architects or visual artists who are doing artistic research. Here the emphasis is on the artistic outcome. ‘Research about art’ refers to scientific processes in which a researcher studies a topic related to art, without artistically interfering with the subject under study; studying art history or studying the impact of art (or the participation in an art project) on people’s lives. Articles classified in the categories ‘art as research’ and ‘research about art’ will be excluded from this review.

Furthermore, our focus is on articles that explore educational and social practices through the arts. Articles on art therapy or medically inspired projects are excluded. We move beyond the therapeutic, psychological approach and present research projects that are oriented toward ‘collaborative participatory practice and social-change’, with the purpose to improve the lives of the participants by tackling contemporary problems, critically exploring complexities and stimulating people to take control over their lives (Clover, 2011). Articles discussing health related prevention initiatives are included, because we feel there is a very thin line between health care and social welfare when it comes to discussing the place of prevention from a disciplinary point of view. We keep the search wide and include a variety of artistic methods, e.g. visual and performance methods. The broad focus will allow us to cross-compare characteristics of studies using different artistic techniques and will provide us with important information on frequencies of use of particular techniques, under which circumstances they are used and for which reasons. It also allows us to identify differences in strengths and weaknesses between techniques.

2.4.3. Population
We define a vulnerable group of people as those who are “impoverished, disenfranchised, and/or subject to discrimination, intolerance, subordination and stigma” (Nyamathi, 1998, p. 65). We include any age group in any context, as

Table 1
Example of a search string outlined for the database IBSS.

<table>
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<th>Terms to capture arts-based research: search abstract</th>
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<tr>
<td>(SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Visual arts&quot;) OR SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Performing arts&quot;) OR SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Fine arts&quot;)) OR ab(&quot;arts-based&quot; OR &quot;arts-based&quot; OR &quot;arts-informed&quot; OR &quot;arts informed&quot; OR &quot;visual research&quot; OR &quot;visual method&quot;&quot; OR &quot;photo-voice&quot; OR &quot;photovoice&quot; OR &quot;photo-elicitation&quot; OR &quot;photo elicitation&quot; OR paint OR &quot;design&quot; OR &quot;collage&quot; OR &quot;dra...</td>
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<th>Terms to capture population: search all fields</th>
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<td>S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Adolescence&quot;) OR S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Youth&quot;) OR S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Migrants&quot;) OR S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Poverty&quot;) OR S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Refugees&quot;) OR S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Asylum seekers&quot;) OR S.U.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Minorities&quot;) OR women OR marginalized OR vulnerable OR &quot;low income&quot; OR poor OR homeless OR oppressed OR disempowered OR disadvantaged OR underserved OR unemployed OR underemployed OR &quot;low skilled&quot; OR &quot;low-skilled&quot;</td>
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<th>Terms to capture setting: search all fields</th>
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<td>(SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Community participation&quot;) OR SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Community power&quot;) OR SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Community&quot;) OR SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Community development&quot;) OR SU.EXACT.EXPLODE(&quot;Community care&quot;) OR (communit&quot; OR &quot;community-based&quot; OR &quot;community based&quot; OR neighborhood&quot;))</td>
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long as they can be considered as vulnerable. This justifies our choice to include for example ethnic minorities, immigrants, the homeless, women, people with disabilities, but also elderly, children and youth. We realize that the classification of elderly, women and youth as vulnerable is an area of debate. However, we chose to include them because, to a large extent, they are still ‘marginalized’ in an adult and male dominated society, hereby experiencing unequal power relations (Punch, 2002).

2.4.4. Setting

We will select articles in which the researchers have worked explicitly with or in a community. Research projects that target individuals, for example art therapy projects, will be excluded from this review. In line with Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (1998) we do not exclusively define ‘community’ as a geographical area or neighborhood where the research takes place. Communities can also refer to groups of people sharing a particular identity, cultural heritage, language, belief, shared fate or interest. Community-based research is further defined as an approach that recognizes the strengths of the community as a core aspect of the research process and promotes the equitable involvement of all partners, including community members, researchers and/or community agencies (e.g. Community Health Scholars Program, 2013). We will only select articles in which participants and the researcher(s) are actively involved in the research process. Studies that show no sign of active involvement of the target group, e.g. members of a community, will be excluded.

The screening form developed to separate studies relevant to our review from those irrelevant can be retrieved online from http://ppw.kuleuven.be/home/english/research/mesrg/documents/paper-supplements/paper-supplements-sara-coemans/supplementary-file-2.docx.

It will be used in all screening phases outlined below.

2.5. Study selection

A three-step screening strategy will be used to select studies that are relevant for including in our scoping review. An initial screening of study titles will be undertaken by the lead reviewer to determine whether or not a study falls within the scope of the review. A second screening will be conducted by two reviewers independently, based on the abstracts and bibliographic information, using our inclusion and exclusion criteria. Disagreements between the reviewers will be solved by discussion with a third reviewer. A third screening will be based on the full-text reading of the articles that have been labeled as relevant or unclear based on the abstract.

2.6. Data-extraction and synthesis

The data extraction process will mirror the guidance outlined in the supplemental guidance of the Cochrane Qualitative Research Methods Group (Noyes & Lewin, 2011). We intend to start with an initial reading of five included studies to form a classification scheme. We will conduct a descriptive, within-case analysis of each of the research articles that are included in the dataset, followed by a cross-case analysis looking into differences and commonalities across studies. We will opt for the extraction of a limited, core set of items, that are mainly informative and descriptive. Data to be extracted will include: year of publication, country, participant characteristics, setting, sample, research design, rationale for using ABR methods, methods for data collection, data analysis and dissemination, and the strengths and limitations of the applied ABR approach.

The data will be extracted using a standard MS Excel sheet. The data extraction form will be trialed on the first five studies and then refined. The extraction will be conducted by 1 reviewer and checked by another. The extraction phase will be followed by a descriptive, statistical analysis of data presenting percentages for the content generated in the different extraction categories (e.g. the ABR techniques used, the research designs opted for, country of the study). This will be supplemented with a narrative synthesis of for example the dominant rationales for conducting ABR, the limitations and strengths of the approaches etc. This mapping will allow us to evaluate under which circumstances ABR may or may not work and what the significant research gaps are.

3. Discussion

An a priori protocol can assist researchers in the preparation of a scoping review that is often a complex process comprising many judgments and decision points. It strengthens the clarity and transparency of the process and it prevents problems from occurring during the review process (Hammerstrøm, Wade, & Jørgensen, 2010). This protocol is the result from a more iterative process to preparing the review process, mainly because we were facing an area of interest that is in development. We initially experienced difficulties in defining clear in- and exclusion criteria, due to the rather vague definitions on ABR methods offered in the literature retrieved and the broad variety of terms used to define community-based research and vulnerability. Consequently, the protocol has constantly been refined while studying the abstracts and the full texts. This implies that we adopted a screening procedure based on the principle of constant comparative method.
Timeline and author involvement

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<td>Karin Hannes</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Sara Coemans (1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; screener)</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Qingchun Wang &amp; Joyce Leysen (2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; screeners)</td>
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<td>Karin Hannes (3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; screener)</td>
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<td>Karin Hannes</td>
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Note: We welcome participation in the review and additional comments on the protocol from the readers.

Conflicts of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Anne-Leen Raymakers for offering her assistance in screening a subset of articles related to the review. We would also like to thank Ilse Neirinck, information retrieval specialist, for her advice in developing and testing the search strategy.

References


