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Decolonising Participatory Methods with Children and Young People in International Research Collaborations: Reflections from a Participatory Arts-Based Project with Afrocolombian and Indigenous Young People in Colombia

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Introduction

In projects with children and young people globally, participatory methodologies have received much critical attention (Tisdall, 2015). They have been celebrated for their potential to centre the agendas

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and resources of children and young people themselves and to produce knowledge collaboratively (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). They are often seen to remedy some of the intergenerational power imbalances between young people and adults, as well as the broader power imbalances of social research (Lundy & McEvoy, 2017; Tisdall, 2015).

Participatory methodologies have emerged from a rich history of activism and transformative education, particularly within the Global South.[1] They have been especially influential in the field of 'international development', and not without criticism (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). For those working with children and young people, participatory methodologies also align with international children's human rights discourses and legislation (such as UNCRC, 1989), which have been shaping discussions in the field for some time.

Participatory methodologies do not exist in a social vacuum but are always located within research relationships and contexts (see Brydon-Miller et al., 2011). In this chapter, we reflect on our experiences of working on a collaborative project involving Afrocolombian and indigenous young people in Chocó, Colombia, and a team of artists, educators and researchers located in different cities in Colombia and the United Kingdom. We are grappling with questions around the place of participatory methodologies in such projects:

What happens to participatory methodologies as they become subsumed into global knowledge politics and research relations?
How do these structural issues translate into relationships and methods 'on the ground'?
How are they shaped by the positionality of those involved?
How can we preserve their emancipatory potential as we work within these particular structures of power?

[1] We recognise that the terms Global North and Global South are problematic, as they are often used as euphemisms for other, more valuing terms (e.g., 'Third World'). Some countries, such as Australia and New Zealand (geographically located in the Southern Hemisphere which may be considered as pertaining to the Global South), tend not to be included within this term. We use them here in consistency with the rest of this edited collection, and to recognise the fact that there are indeed historical relations of colonialism and exploitation across countries in the Global North and South, that continue to shape global geopolitics today.

We suggest that ongoing efforts to decolonise participatory methodologies need to be at the heart of international research collaborations, to avoid the co-optation of participatory methodologies into processes of neoliberal knowledge production and neo-colonisation. The chapter concludes that participatory methodologies have the potential to decolonise knowledges, yet particular knowledges and approaches are also needed to decolonise participatory methodologies.[2]

Participatory Methods with Children and Young People: A Critical History

The idea of participation, for childhood and youth researchers and practitioners, is firmly linked to children's human rights as enshrined in the UNCRC (1989). Article 12 (1) of the UNCRC (the right to express views in all matters that affect the child, and to have those views given due weight) is generally cited to support participation rights, alongside other articles grouped together as participation rights (Articles 13, 14, 15, 17) and the UNCRC General Comment on Article 12 (1) (2009) by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is an authoritative interpretation of this Article.

The universal application of human rights discourses has been a contentious issue. The UNCRC has been critiqued for imposing a Global North view of childhood and youth: for example, focussing on individualised notions of rights, relying on Global North assumptions about families and communities, or enabling interventions which promote Global North norms around children's development and parent–child relationships (Ennew, 1995; Valentine & Meinert, 2009; Tisdall, 2015). Nevertheless, children's human rights can provide a key tool for social change and social justice, when their instrumentalisation considers the cultural, social and economic contexts within which children and young people are located (Vandenhole et al., 2015). A decolonial lens on children's rights, with more nuanced contextualised

[2] This chapter was written by the 'adult' research team, and the young co-researchers have not been involved in the writing. For further discussion, see later in this chapter.

guidance on its implementation, is required to avoid it being used as a tool of Global North domination over former colonies under the guise of 'children's best interests' (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020, p. 83). Examples of decolonial thought are discussed further below, for example in the work of Freire (1970).

While children's human rights play a key role in contemporary discourses around participatory methods with children and young people, participatory methodologies more broadly have a long and rich history. As is the case with all theoretical concepts, the ways in which their genealogies are told are not neutral. Often framed as Participatory Action Research (PAR), participatory research approaches have emerged in the early twentieth century as a challenge to positivist social science, with the aim to achieve social transformation through collective processes of knowledge production and inquiry. They were driven by Black, indigenous and feminist scholars in different parts of the world (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011). Some often-cited early examples are Lewin (1946) in the US, Rajesh Tandon (Brown & Tandon, 1983) in India, and Swantz in Tanzania (Hall, 2005).

Writers agree on the particularly influential role of Latin American scholars in the development of PAR approaches. In Brazil, Paolo Freire's work (chiefly, his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970) repositioned individuals not as objects of inquiry or empty vessels, but as experts on their own lives. He challenged accepted dichotomies of expert researchers versus lay communities, by developing decolonial pedagogies and processes to reverse these established relationships, and by confronting oppressive power relations through promoting 'critical consciousness'. Another key figure in the Latin American radical intellectual movements of the 1970s was Orlando Fals Borda, a Colombian researcher closely associated with the development of PAR. He contested the 'epistemological gap' between academics and grassroot communities and developed a series of interdisciplinary tools and exercises for collaborative activist research and its public dissemination (Fals Borda, 2001; see also Robles Lomeli & Rappaport, 2018). His legacy continues to shape activist research in the Global South and Global North today, particularly in the field of human rights and emancipatory education.

With their activist and emancipatory tradition, participatory methodologies have emerged as a challenge to epistemic violence and other forms of imposed knowledge transfer oppression (Spivak, 1994). However, numerous critiques have highlighted that while participatory methodologies have a strong potential to redress some of the power imbalances in knowledge production, they can also be utilised in problematic ways. Cooke and Kothari (2001) famously described a new 'tyranny' of participation in the field of international development—highlighting how participatory methodologies may reinforce existing power hierarchies, may take exclusionary forms, or may co-opt grassroot agendas while on the surface advocating a 'bottom up' approach. Furthermore, Parpart (2000) suggests that participatory approaches in development are often gender-biassed or reinforce patriarchal structures.

Others have highlighted how the wider context of research practices and relations is steeped in colonial histories that inevitably shape all methodologies and knowledge production. For example, Smith (2012) traces the 'dirty' histories of research as an imperialist project, grounded in Westerners' claims of 'discovery' of indigenous people and lands, researchers' exploitative practices, and uncritical assertions about regimes of truth and originality. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017, online) suggests that dichotomies of researcher/knower and researched/known/'other' continue to pervade research. He proposes that 'the process of [methodology's] decolonisation is an ethical, ontological and political exercise rather than simply one of approach and ways of producing knowledge'. This requires a critical deconstruction of Global North research agendas, practices and epistemologies, through what Mignolo (2009) terms 'epistemic disobedience'.

Decolonising Childhood and Children's Participation: Who Participates, and for What Purpose?

In its broadest sense, decolonisation aims to undo historical and ongoing processes of colonialism, with a focus on the intellectual, emotional, economic and political reversal of colonial injustices. In relation to

childhood and youth, the concept of decolonisation has been interpreted in different ways. For some scholars (e.g., Varga, 2011), the focus lies on intergenerational relationships and emphasis is placed on how childhood—as a period in human lives as well as a social construct—has become colonised by adults in various disciplinary spheres (such as education or psychology). Therefore, such perspectives call for decolonising knowledge about childhood and youth by coproducing it with children and young people themselves and thus addressing the epistemic injustices that children face (Cheney, 2010; Jiménez, 2021).

Similarly, Burman (2020, p. 104) suggests that decolonisation in the field of childhood, refers to 'liberating children from the burden of the dominant models of childhood which regulate and stigmatise them and narrate their life course'. This involves, for example, rejecting developmental notions of childhood which perpetuate regulatory knowledge of what it means to be a child or young person, often from very classed, racialised and gendered perspectives. Such dominant and universalising ideas marginalise children and young people who do not fall within these norms, both within the Global North and even more so in the Global South (Burman, 2020). Balagopalan (2019) criticises scholarly discourses that assume an unpolitical idea of 'multiple' global childhoods (which are highly normatively inflected), if these discourses do not also clearly recognise the colonial histories which led to these very childhoods and their different manifestations. Importantly, the experiences of children and young people are not homogenous, both within the Global South and Global North, and simplistic binary assumptions about Global North/South childhoods do not do justice to the complexity and interconnected power relations that frame children's lives globally, in terms of materialities, education, participation and so on.

Ideas about childhood and youth inevitably influence how participatory processes are conceived and realised. While children and young people's participation generally tends to be seen as a 'normative good' (Tisdall, 2015, p. 194), there has been some critical debate about how different types of participation are valued differently. For example, Savyasaachi and Butler (2014) highlight that typologies generally emphasise participation within institutionalised contexts (such as schools or

projects), which are ascribed more status and educational value than, say, participation activities pursued by street children in informal contexts.

On a methodological level, the childhood studies and children's rights fields have long been attuned to questions about intergenerational and intra-generational power relations, the risks of tokenistic approaches and the complex practicalities of meaningful co-production with children and young people (see for example Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Tisdall, 2015; Lundy & McEvoy, 2017; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). There have also been debates in the relevant literature on *who* the children and young people are, that are routinely included or excluded within participatory projects (Emejulu, 2013). For example, there is a tendency to exclude very young children, or children and young people who are marginalised from mainstream discourses. On the other hand, some groups of children and young people are often only involved in projects about the particular focus of their marginalisation; for example, children with disabilities tend to be involved in projects about disability but are often excluded from projects on other topics (Blaisdell et al., 2021).

These debates highlight that what counts as participation and participatory methodologies, as well as how children and young people's roles in research are conceived, are firmly embedded into broader intergenerational and intersectional research relationships. In the following sections, we provide some examples of how these dynamics have played out in our project.

The Project: ¿Cuál Es La Verdad? De-Constructing Collective Memories and Imagining Alternative Futures with Young People in Chocó Through Music and Arts

Our project involved working with a group of Afrocolombian and indigenous young people, who became involved as co-researchers in the project. The young co-researchers were located in Quibdó (Chocó), a remote area disproportionately affected by armed conflict and home to

mainly Afrocolombian and indigenous populations. Quibdó's history is strongly shaped by colonialism, including the enslavement of its people through Europeans from the sixteenth century onwards, and ongoing extractive economies through international corporations (Calderón, 2018, 2021). Our broader research team consisted of two researchers based in the United Kingdom, one researcher based in Medellin, Colombia (who relocated to the UK part-way through the project), and a larger group of educators, artists and musicians from two arts-based organisations based in Medellin and Cali respectively.

The overall aim of the project was to respond to priorities identified by the young people: tensions within and between neighbourhoods (barrios), violence and armed gangs, and feelings of fear and distrust. These priorities, and our methodological approaches, were developed with a group of young people in participatory workshops which informed our funding application. While originally conceived as an in-person project using arts-based and music-based methodologies, our methodology had to be shifted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which created additional considerations and challenges for participation (see Kustatscher et al., 2020; Calderon et al., 2021). An additional aim emerged during the project, namely, to support the young people to set up a gastro-cultural social enterprise business.

Global Research Relations and Funding Structures

Our project was funded through the Global Challenges Research Fund, a funding stream financed from the UK Government's developmental aid budget[3]. Projects under this fund are aimed at creating 'meaningful and equitable relationships' between UK-based academics and partners in the Global South, and to 'address challenges faced by developing countries' (UKRI, 2021). However, concerns have also been raised about the extent

[3] The socio-political dimensions of this fund have been illustrated by recent reductions of official development assistance (ODA) budgets and subsequent funding cuts to new and ongoing research projects in the United Kingdom (see for example Tomley, 2021).

to which its funding requirements may reproduce structural inequalities (Grieve & Mitchell, 2020; Mkwananzi & Cin, 2021; Virk et al., 2019) and about its inherent epistemological biases (Girei, 2017).

Such concerns have been echoed to some extent in our project. Contractual agreements, and questions of ownership and research direction, appeared to be tilted in favour of UK-based partners. English was the main language of most research meetings, contracts and reports. Funding requirements encouraged travel of UK-based researchers to partner countries, but not vice-versa, highlighting inherent assumptions about the flow of expertise from the Global North to the South (in reality, the UK-based researchers went on a much steeper learning curve) and principles of knowledge extractivism. Research applications needed to highlight the extent of marginalisation and scale of possible change in the proposed research location, tempting researchers to create damage-based narratives about the contexts and people involved in projects to secure funding. Such hierarchies of deprivation can be problematic and illustrative of underlying white saviourism. Similar assumptions pervade much of the language in international development work, for example through terms such as 'capacity-building' (who builds capacity, in whom and for what? why is there an assumed lack of capacity in the first place?).

As members of the research team, we were all positioned differently—through our individual locations, identities and institutional affiliations—in this global web of power relations. As researchers, artists and educators, our livelihoods directly or indirectly depended on being a part of the project. Kapoor (2005) states that in participatory development projects, there are inevitable and often unconscious layers of complicity with colonial structures since we are implicated by default as we work within them. The rewards of working with young people and seeking to support them in transforming their lives and communities are at the same time implicating us in the broader power structures of developmental and intergenerational research.

Arts-Based Participatory Methodologies: Context and Flexibility

There are a wide range of methods that have been utilised under the umbrella of participatory research. Arts-based methods have been popular both in research with children and young people, as well as in international development. The advantages of arts-based methods in terms of children and young people's ability to express themselves, support inclusivity and foster wellbeing are often cited (see Lee et al., 2020). Indeed, we found that utilising music as a popular art form in the young people's communities helped to attract and sustain their participation in the project, enabling dialogue and a sense of collectivity. The power of music and arts went beyond aesthetics and enjoyment: the young co-researchers highlighted the potential of music and arts to transform their lives and communities, both through its inspirational and political power as well as in more material forms, for example by commodifying it for creative enterprise purposes.

As scholars in the fields of both youth participation and international development have highlighted, participatory methods contain the potential to decolonise knowledge and address child–adult power imbalances—but they can also reproduce the very power relationships that they seek to challenge. We were aware of risks about research being extractive, rather than transformative, and complex questions about the origins and ownerships of methodologies. Additionally, conducting the project online meant that some of the young people were not able to join due to issues of connectivity, which could not be resolved through data plans or purchasing devices. This illustrates that despite best intentions, participants were located within particular social and material structures which inevitably shaped the conditions of and obstacles to their participation.

While it may be a truism that participatory projects need to be adaptable and flexible, this does not always sit easily with funding requirements and timelines. Yet it was in this space of adaptation that many of the opportunities for making the project meaningful opened for us. For example, as an unexpected outcome, the young co-researchers developed a complex vision for a multi-strand gastro-cultural social

enterprise which celebrates their Afrocolombian and indigenous heritage, and this became a core element of the project to which they dedicated huge amounts of energy and passion.

Representation and 'Impact' at the Crossroads Between Research, Education and Intervention

As researchers we are socialised into academic discourses about what constitutes research, what are accepted methodologies and knowledges, and how to represent them. Working as part of an interdisciplinary team of researchers, artists and educators, located in different institutions and countries, helped us to unsettle some of these assumptions. It also highlighted that our project was taking place at the crossroads of research, education and social intervention. Depending on how these elements are weighted, there can be different assumptions about expertise. For example, in research with children and young people, they are generally seen as experts on their own lives (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). At the same time, providing training, for example, on participatory methodologies or on business skills, to the young people as part of the project positioned them as learners. Of course, framing a project as pedagogical does not necessarily imply a transmissive attitude to knowledge (Freire, 1970). However, we found it important to reflect as a team about how and where the boundaries are drawn around research, education and intervention and the implications in terms of expertise and power.

Participatory methodologies have been lauded for their potential to create change in participants' lives (Lee et al., 2020; Tisdall, 2015). This is particularly pertinent in the context of calls for research projects to deliver sustainable 'impact'. Young people were *invited* into the project because of their particular social locations and characteristics, yet there are limits to the extent to which projects like ours can transform these very conditions. This is perhaps one of the issues that is silenced by this

type of research. If participation remains 'project-based' rather than integrated into broader practices and institutions, it will inevitably face such limitations.

Nevertheless, the project has sparked a huge amount of new learning for the research team, including the young co-researchers. This involved both learning about each other's lives, about methodologies (particularly in the digital sphere) and about the practicalities of working in an international research team. Some of this learning is emotional and embodied, some of it factual or philosophical. It is the latter which tends to be more easily represented in outputs such as academic writing, talks or audiovisual outputs. With any publication, there is a risk that knowledge becomes represented in compartmentalised or sanitised ways, which reintegrates it into academic discourses that are shaped by colonial power relations.

The weight given to written research outputs, particularly academic publications, constitutes another layer of potential epistemic injustice. In our case, the young co-researchers were keen to produce audiovisual outputs such as songs and music videos, but less interested to contribute to more formal written outputs. Indeed, it often falls to the academic members of a project team to do justice to representing children and young people's views and experiences. This highlights the need for comprehensive publication plans and agreements in such projects, which cover all types of outputs, for including everyone involved in the project and for paying attention to questions of ethics and representation.

Ethics, Reflexivity and Relationality

Many writers have emphasised that ethical considerations go beyond what is covered by institutional review boards, and that these can be limited with regards to addressing 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin et al., 2012). Processes of decolonisation are fundamentally about the ethics of how we relate to each other within projects and about how the benefits and risks of research are shared, yet questions of decolonisation tend not to be part of institutional ethics reviews. The relationality of research ethics—in terms of wellbeing, ownership, care, respect—was apparent

throughout our project, both in terms of relationships within the team as well as with the young people. Heightened by the shift to online research, our Colombian team spent large amounts of time and energy to sustain relationships with young people and to support them. This support ranged from arranging mental health services to assisting them to deal with economic emergencies, to continuously bearing witness to their experiences. Such lived and situated ethics can be quite different from 'traditional' ethical review processes, which can be more about protecting researchers than participants, and thus risk reifying colonial research relations.

At the time of the research, Colombia saw sustained social protests against government corruption and growing inequality, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, we were conscious of the fact that our research team lived in different locations from the young participants of the project (in different cities of Colombia, and the UK). Those conducting participatory research need to be particularly reflective about 'the material and political conditions of the collaborative research endeavor' (Robles, 2018, p. 607). Reflexivity also extends to questions around how our positionality serves as a resource or barrier in the process of research, how we frame the research and who, if at all, gives us the right to carry out certain types of research (Christoffersen, 2018).

The fact that we were in different geographical locations from the young people, as well as the fact that the majority of our research team did not share the cultural and ethnic heritage[4] of the Afrocolombian and indigenous young people, meant that we shared their experiences to a limited extent. While we were deeply impacted through the relationships built over the course of the project, these different locations meant that we were outsiders to the young people's lives. This is not necessarily only a disadvantage. On many occasions, the young people stated that they valued the relationships and witnessing of their lives through

[4] While the UK-based team members identified as white, ethnic and racial identity is complex in Colombia. There is a strong cultural narrative of mestizaje ('race mixture') which suggests that everyone is of mixed racial heritage, to varying degrees, and promotes a narrative of multiculturalism that prioritises socio-economic over racial elements of stratification. Nevertheless, skin colour-based hierarchies and racism are a significant element of the distribution of social advantages and disadvantages (Restrepo, 2018; Valle, 2018).

outsiders. However, it created particular dynamics in terms of supporting the co-researchers to develop and realise the project on the ground.

All our team members have expressed a commitment to continue to maintain contact and support the young co-researchers in their endeavours, in their personal capacity, beyond the funded timeframe of the project. This aligns with Abebe's (2020) call for reciprocity as a key principle in participatory research with children and young people, going beyond material rewards to include loyalty and a commitment to sustained activism for change.

Conclusion

Prompted by global Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests in 2020, institutions in the UK and other countries in the Global North have begun to hear calls for decolonisation (which, of course, have been going on for a long time). As decolonisation becomes a buzzword in academic institutions of the Global North, there is a risk that it is turned into yet another trend or tickbox and, ironically, becomes subsumed into neoliberal knowledge production and implemented in purely performative ways (see also Moncrieffe, 2020, 2021).

There are parallels between children and young people's participation, and between processes of decolonisation. Both require a deep reckoning with taken for granted, established power relations (both intergenerational as well as intersectional along axes of race, ethnicity, language, nationality, age, gender, social class and more). With both, there are risks of tokenism, erasure and illusory visibility (Diaz-Diaz, 2021). And both meaningful participation as well as decolonisation require ongoing, relational and evolving commitment rather than following a logic of completion.

Returning to our earlier point about what decolonisation means in childhood and youth studies, it should involve three elements: First, it means involving children and young people in the generation of knowledges about their own lives. This may imply a challenge to accepted beliefs about what constitutes knowledge. Second, it requires us to critically interrogate, and liberate children and young people from dominant

theories and models of childhood that continue to shape normative ideas about what it means to be a child (Burman, 2020). Finally, it means to make visible and challenge the colonial histories and ongoing power dynamics which shape children's lives across the globe, while refraining from simplistic or stereotypical assumptions.

In this chapter, we have shared our reflections on how projects like ours are situated within global research relations and funding landscapes, and how these frame all aspects of research—from relationships to methodologies, from ethics to outcomes. Participatory methodologies in themselves do not decolonise—it depends on what theories, positionalities and relationships inform their realisation. With the best of intentions, some structural issues pervading projects—such as white hegemonic frameworks or resource distribution—cannot be easily 'resolved'. A rose-tinted view of participatory methodologies is not only unhelpful but can be dangerous—it can facilitate white saviourism and co-opt young people's agendas.

Decolonising participatory methods cannot be achieved through tick box exercises. It requires an ongoing questioning of our complicity—especially as the white members of this project team or those belonging to majority groups in their contexts, as well as those being based in the Global North. Given the ongoing realities of colonial histories highlighted in this chapter, there is a valid question about whether white people/people from the Global North should conduct research in the Global South in the first place. There is no generalised answer to this. Anyone who does, needs to think deeply and critically about what we, as individuals and through our institutional and geographical locations, bring to the table. What power do we hold, or not hold? What do we assume and project, consciously and unconsciously? Who gains and who loses in this process? How does our involvement deconstruct or reify colonial narratives and practices?

These questions are pertinent for any research project, and particularly for those that aim to achieve social transformation through research. As de Sousa Santos (2007) says, there can be no global social justice without global cognitive justice.

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