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Visualizing access: knowledge development in university–community partnerships

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Abstract   This article tackles the need to democratize processes of knowledge production in the context of university–community partnerships. These partnerships, which are a rich source of academic research, allow universities to create more reciprocal relationships with communities, especially those affected by social inequalities. Through their social engagement and programmatic efforts, universities strive to increase the level of community access to educational, economic, and even political resources. However, from the community perspective, the production of knowledge still remains an academic privilege, a privilege to which community members lack any access. This article presents a case study in the context of a long-term university–community partnership in which activist women living in poverty became involved in the production of knowledge. Findings refer to four main challenges in the process of co-production of knowledge with excluded populations: overcoming community antagonism and lack of trust toward academic research, engaging the community in the research process, grappling with ethical and practical issues in the process of knowledge dissemination and finally making research matters for social change. The article voices the need to develop more inclusive, action-oriented and accessible methods for knowledge production.

Keywords   University–community partnership · Community-based research · Photovoice · Visual research · Poverty · Social exclusion · Researchers–participants relations

Introduction

This article examines the complexity entailed in the co-production of academic research with excluded communities. Based on a case study in Israel in which women activists living in poverty engaged in a qualitative visual participatory research project as principal

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researchers, the article highlights the need to develop more inclusive research method-ologies to increase communities' access to the restricted domain of academic research. Findings refer to main challenges in the process of co-production of knowledge with excluded populations such as overcoming community antagonism and lack of trust (Ap-padurai 2006), engaging the community in the research process (Strier 2007, 2010), grappling with ethical and practical issues in the process of knowledge exposure and dissemination (Banks 2013) and finally making research matters for social change (Hessels and Van Lente 2008; Newman 2011).

The article is divided into four sections. First, it reviews the question of community access to knowledge development processes in the frame of university–community part-nerships and the role of participatory visual action research methodology in the democ-ratization of academic research. Second, it describes the context and methodology of the study. Third, it identifies and analyzes key findings, and finally it discusses the contribution of these methodologies to facilitate the active inclusion of socially excluded groups' members in the production and dissemination of knowledge in the context of university–community partnerships.

Literature review

Knowledge development in university–community partnerships

Recent decades have shown a growing interest in the creation of long-lasting partnerships between institutions of higher education and communities with the intent of joining together to address multiple social issues. In addition to civic engagement and community development projects, these initiatives also consist of community-based research projects which are a prolific area for research (Davis et al. 2006; Silka 1999; Suarez-Balcazar and Kinney 2006). Community-based research projects in the context of university–community partnerships serve multiple goals. They not only provide researchers with access to the field, they also facilitate direct interaction with their target audiences (Davis et al. 2006; Howard et al. 2010). Based on scientific and local experience, they help in data collection, hypothesis testing, theory development, and assessment of intervention programs (Dentato et al. 2010; Lo and Bayer 2003; Mays et al. 1998; Minkler et al. 2006). However, these initiatives may also result in discrepancy. On the one hand, these research projects produce a new sense of familiarity, intimacy, openness and trust between researchers and the community. On the other hand, these partnerships can sometimes increase the sense of inequality and alienation that exists between the academy and the community (Farquhar and Dobson 2005), especially since academic research is a highly exclusive domain (Farquhar and Dobson 2005). Indeed, research processes require resources, skills, and capabilities that are far beyond the reach of marginalized communities (Dumka et al. 2007). One of the challenges facing Academy–community partnerships is to create alter-native research methodologies, those which are more egalitarian and accessible, and develop research which is not necessarily exclusionary.

Some methodologies offer alternative models for knowledge development in a wide variety of research areas such as health (Barger and Das 2004; Howard et al. 2010; Landry et al. 2009; Lantz et al. 2001; McDaid 2009), community leadership development (Goldring and Sims 2005), environment (Borck and Coglianese 2009), education (Dumka et al. 2007; Poulin and Nicholson 2005; Wilson et al. 2006), and rehabilitation (Farquhar

and Dobson 2005). One of the main obstacles in the democratization of research lies in its academic language, the predominance of the written over the verbal and visual representation. In order to face this divide, recent years have seen a growing interest in the use of visual means for participative research in different disciplines.

Community-based participatory visual action research

One of the paths to change unequal power relations between researchers and marginalized communities is through community-based participatory visual action research. This kind of community-based participatory action research merges three research traditions (action research, participative research and performative research) and two social missions (community development and the creation of inclusive knowledge to strive for social justice) (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Flicker et al. 2007). Community-based participatory visual action research places researchers and community members in full partnership throughout all research stages (Flicker et al. 2007; Thomasa et al. 2009). However, these community-based participatory projects are highly complex and require coping with varied challenges such as dealing with community's negative views of academic research (Carney et al. 2012), engaging the community in the research process (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2008), addressing ethical issues in the process of knowledge dissemination (Banks 2013) and finally facing questions related to transforming knowledge into action for social change (Buettgen et al. 2012). In community-based participatory visual action research, as in action research in general, researchers renounce many of the traditional roles of mainstream scientific research in which they are required to stay detached from participants in order to maintain a certain degree of objectivity (Farquhar and Dobson 2005). In addition, the nature of visual data increases the interpretative and heuristic character of knowledge development (Rose 2001). The success of participatory visual action research requires proximity, systematic engagement, affinity, trust, and good rapport between researchers and community. Sometimes, researchers respond to the desire of the participants to see immediate results, which is usually inconsistent with the slow pace that characterizes the academic research process. Participants wish to see immediate social or policy change, i.e. some form of tangible outcome. These disparities between academic and community agendas raise the need to balance the knowledge development requirements with pragmatic actions (Davis et al. 2006; Lantz et al. 2001; Thomasa et al. 2009). In general, these projects are extremely complex as they challenge social hierarchies deeply rooted in shared social images and beliefs such as the idea that researchers are the real experts, that community lay knowledge is inferior to academic knowledge and that knowledge that is expressed in visual terms is far from being as precise as the knowledge transmitted through written academic jargon (Dennis and Eby 2007). All these common views represent real obstacles to any possible future democratization of the fabric of academic knowledge production.

One of the reasons for the development of visual research is the growth of visual digital technology, which favored its uses for research purposes (Kalviainen and Miller 2005). Visual methods allow researchers to explore phenomena difficult to describe in words. Recent years have found a growing recognition of the power of the visual and its use in democratized social change (SzTo 2008). This article examines the contribution of these methodologies to the increased access of communities to knowledge development processes in the context of university–community partnerships.

Methodology

One of the innovative visual research methodologies developed in this context is Photovoice (Molloy 2007; Nykiforuk et al. 2011; Wang et al. 2004; Wang 2006). This methodology uncovers the discursive aspects of the visual world (Kelley 2011). For members of excluded communities, visual participative action research methods open up opportunities to share their experience and knowledge which is difficult to express in words alone (Nykiforuk et al. 2011). This methodology allows excluded groups to take action and raise social awareness by presenting their findings to the public as well as to the government (Kelley 2011).

Participants

Photovoice participants were nine women, all activists in the context of a university–community partnership named "Haifa Partnership Project: Breaking the Chains of Poverty (HPP)." HPP was established in 2006 by the School of Social Work at the University of Haifa in cooperation with the Department of Social Services of the Municipality of Haifa. HPP's aim is to engage academic researchers, social workers from the social services, community leaders, social service users from impoverished neighborhoods, and social work students in shared actions and programs to improve the living conditions of families living in poverty in the City of Haifa. The Photovoice project was conducted during 2010–2012. The initiative comes from the HPP's Academic Chair and a master's student, who was formerly an undergraduate student activist in HPP for 3 years and has a close relationship with the women activists engaged in the Photovoice project. The study was part of her Master's Thesis in which the HHP Academic Chair was also her MA student supervisor, both authors of this article. The nine participant's ages ranged between 45 and 60 years old [three married, one widowed and the rest (5) divorced]. All have children; six work part time jobs and three are unemployed. All nine participants receive income supplements and are welfare clients in the public social services. Many of them have life trajectories related to poverty, sexual harassment or domestic violence. Prior to the Photovoice project, they used to meet on a weekly basis as a learning, action and support group, usually coordinated by a social work student in the context of social work field practice. Over the years these women became spokeswomen to the media, legislators, and policy makers on the critical issue of poverty. The background for the initiative to include them in the process of research development was the women's group repetitive claim that the University, despite its benevolent desire to be accessible to the community, exploits poor communities such as theirs as objects for academic, inaccessible research, a critique vividly expressed in the words of one of the Photovoice participants "we always feel like the mice of your poverty lab."

Research process

1. Start-up stage
2. The research process started with a 2-h group session conducted by the group coordinator in which participants were asked about their willingness to become part of a research project as researchers. The next step was personal meetings between the research coordinator and participants in which they discussed multiple questions and issues. Afterwards, a second session was scheduled to talk about expectations and

delicate ethical issues such the level of personal and family exposure expected due to the research process. The third meeting was devoted to clarifying the meaning of "research" for the participants (training stage)

3. Next, the research coordinator facilitated a training program related to participant instruction on basic photography skills. In addition, two further sessions gave participants tools to collect data through visual means (research planning stage)

The main goal of the third stage was for the participants to democratically vote on and choose a research topic. After much deliberation the group decided to explore the theme of the "The Price of Poverty."

4. Data collection stage
5. The data collection stage was a complicated stage of the research process, characterized by many logistical difficulties, such as the fact that not all the women had a quality digital camera with which to complete the data collection and other technical difficulties (data analysis)

Data analysis was planned and carried out according to Wang and Burris' (1997) participatory model which includes three steps: selection, contextualization and codification. After visual data were gathered, participants selected 15 pictures that the group found more significant. In a second stage, participants contextualized the pictures through situated storytelling activities. In a third stage, codification, participants sorted data into categories of issues, themes or theories. Gillian Rose states that this stage should be clearly defined in ways in which different researchers at different times using the same categories would code the images in exactly the same way (Rose 2001). According to Rose (2014), in both visual research and visual culture images tend to be deployed much more as communicational tools than as representational texts.

6. Public exposure

During this phase the selected pictures were printed. In addition, participants decided to choose a number of key sentences, phrases or words from discussion protocols or interviews to be cited alongside the visual data. The project exhibition comprised 15 pictures (printed in poster size) and citations and was presented in several conferences and public spaces. Some audience members' reactions were videotaped and its contents analyzed. Most participants agreed that the exhibitions and oral presentations helped them to challenge negative stereotypes and to gain a better understanding of the topic (McIntyre 2003). In addition, the visual report was published by the University of Haifa in a special booklet in Hebrew, Arabic and English (Strier and Shechter 2014).

Research questions

The research questions were: how do community members in the context of UC partnerships look at the concept of academic research? How do community members see the relevance of research to their lived realities? How do these participants look at the idea of engaging in knowledge development? What are their motivations and fears regarding engagement? What are their views on Photovoice? How do community members experience their participation as researchers? How do they relate to the knowledge produced? How do participants describe the experience of exposing their knowledge to others? How do participants describe the impact of their experience as researchers on their views of UC partnership?

Findings

This section presents key findings of the study. These findings relate to four main themes: negative views of academic research, engaging in research, exposing knowledge and the impact of the research on social change. Responding to participants' request, all names were changed.

Negative views of academic research

Research as a distant concept: What about us and research?

Research is a remote concept, alien to participants' lives. Most of them expressed apprehensiveness towards the idea of conducting research. The offer to take part in the study stirred up feelings of mistrust. Research is a symbol of the academic world, a world indifferent to their social reality. In addition to the general distrust of the research concept, one of the main barriers to engage the group members in taking part in the project was the view that research is politically ineffective. Sarit, 52, a divorced mother of two, took an active part in group sessions at the beginning of the study. Sarit was very ambiguous regarding the expected benefits of the research project:

> When you start something like that you do not know how it will end. It's like a match—it could fall on wet grass and extinguish or could fall on dry wood and produce a wild fire.

In contrast to Sarit, Tikva, 53, married with four children, chose to focus on the potential benefits of the research, like fund raising, funds that can support future community actions.

> We need to let the public know about our project. We want to bring resources to the project and for this reason we have to bring ourselves (…) We need to think of the group benefit …

In the preliminary group discussions participants seemed hesitant, raising questions like: what will be the impact of their study, how can their research promote social change, how can research be translated into practical terms. However ultimately, the belief that people living in poverty and exclusion are the most authentic source of knowledge for understanding the phenomenon finally prompted participants to get involved in the process.

Considering engagement

After several meetings and discussions in which they were exposed to visual research methodologies some of the activists started to strongly consider joining the project. One of the primary motivations that helped the activists become part of the research project was the will "to say something on the subject of poverty." The idea of working with an action research methodology in which they will determine the research topic, decide research goals and define the research questions catch their interest. Edith, 64, married, in reference to taking part in the research:

> We have an opportunity to explore poverty, draw conclusions, and move on. We have the duty to make our knowledge be known, our voice to be heard.

Participants felt that they had something personal to say on the subject of poverty. They were unanimous in the importance of exposing their insider views of poverty and transmitting their knowledge to the general public without intermediaries. Another motivation to engage in the project was the general feeling that the academic knowledge is not relevant to their community realities. Maggie, 51, a divorced mother of two girls, believes that the knowledge used in the academy is totally disconnected from real life:

> What did you think we can learn through books? We can learn only through people, through pain.

As soon as participants gained a sense of control over the course of the process they decided to join the research project.

Engaging in research

Ethical issues

One of the main barriers to becoming engaged in the research was related to the issue of privacy. As such, some conditioned their participation on a promise that any and all pictures exhibited in a public forum would have their pre-approval. This is not to say that it was not clear to them that the research process would involve some degree of personal exposure. Judith, 51 years old, and active in the program for 7 years, testified that in the past she was a more open person. Her past experiences caused her aversion to entering into the present study:

> Research means to be exposed to the people's eyes—it's like I'm naked to the world. They can see me in my nakedness. Revealing my soul is the same as to exposing my body. It makes me sick.

Ultimately Judith decided not to take pictures but still participate in the research project through assisting in all group sessions. Another barrier to entry into the research process was related to the stigmatic nature of the research topic. Ruth, 60, a divorced mother of two, claimed that exposure as 'a woman living in poverty' involves not only personal degradation but also risks their children's wellbeing:

> Poverty insults, humiliates… but this is not just our humiliation. We also have children who may get hurt.

Participants feared that they themselves and their families could be negatively labelled. In addition to these fears, participants were also concerned with religious and cultural factors. For Maha, 50, a religious-Muslim widow and mother of four, active in the program for 6 years, participation in the study raised doubts related to her status as a religious Muslim woman in a very traditional community. However, ultimately Maha decided to join the research process. Maha believes that in order to voice the plights of Muslim women she has to actively advocate for a better society:

> I was not sure whether or not to take part in the research, but sometimes you need to make the truth known; I personally paid a very high price because I hide my truths. I know that there are many opportunities to get things done when you expose yourself in the right place and at the right time and that it is worth it. I'm going to bare myself in front of relevant people.

Like Maha, other women in the group were convinced that without taking risks they cannot hope to achieve any change. Aviva, 49, a divorced single mother of four, active in the program for 7 years, cautioned her partners in the research project to remain as anonymous as possible and urged them to remember the purpose of their joint efforts—raising public awareness.

> If you do show a picture, do so without your name, people will not know is yours. It may be something that hurts you. We should think twice before we expose ourselves publically.

Edith agreed with Aviva's position, showing her support for the need to raise awareness, but also to advance policy change. Edith adds that researchers can use different methods to prevent their identification:

> We can change things only if we involve the right people, whether it be members of the Knesset or others who have the necessary motivations to make change happen…we just need to hide our faces, it's just a technical matter.

The fear of personal and familial exposure due to the stigmatic nature of poverty was a significant barrier to their engagement in the research process. However, participants realized that without personal exposure and risk-taking they would not be able to change things.

Visualizing research: pictures attract attention, arouse different reactions

The group discovered the high accessibility and innovative nature of visual research methodology. Tikva defined the central advantage of the visual research methodology:

> Photos attract attention, they stimulate. Using photography you can accurately express your ideas and reach people in a simple way.

Edith thought that visual research is a more inclusive and effective way to create knowledge. Aside from the social messages it may transmit, visual research entails a higher quality interaction with a larger audience, with people. She felt that it encourages the public to respond, to react in a stronger way:

> Photography depicts personal situations, stimulates people to respond, intrigues them, inspires people to think.

Participants saw photography as a way to create a dialogue with society, a dialogue that might make a difference. Maggie's words illustrate this concept:

> Image can transmit a lot of things. Images gives over lots of information, but at the end it all depends on who sees them and how they process the information, it's very individual, everyone sees things in his own way. Everyone sees from his own eyes, but interprets it in the way he understands it, images may express lots of messages, messages that lead to social change (…)

If so, in contrast to academic research which was perceived as a foreign domain, participants found visual research to be an accessible area, something new for them, a powerful way to effectively transmit a message. Participants were aware of the use of photography both as a way of personal expression and as a way of social influence. However, they discovered in the training process that photography, like any other kind of

knowledge, is subject to interpretation, and is influenced by perceptions and personal experiences.

Selecting the research topic: This is called a life? This is poverty!

One of the most challenging parts of the group process was to select the topic of the research and to define the research questions. As part of the engagement process, participants were asked to suggest topics for the joint research. These suggestions were then discussed in several group sessions in which participants shared their life stories with the group as to explain their personal choice. For instance, Aviva lives in an apartment in public housing with her eldest son, 28 years old and unemployed, and her youngest son, 7 years old and diagnosed with a neurological disability. Aviva works as part-time caregiver in an early childhood educational afternoon program. She wanted to explore the way in which families living in poverty faced the constant need to provide for the family's needs:

> My salary is very low, it is 1800 shekels. Now the government came with new budget shortcuts. And it's so hard! Including the government income supplement I still have less than 2000 shekels a month. I have an overdraft in the bank of 9000 shekels. It's not for luxury items…It is just the supermarket, food to fill the fridge. I took loans. I am paying interests, I ask myself….This is what is called life? This is poverty!

As with most project participants, Aviva drew out a research topic from her own life story. In the same fashion, Rachel, 47 years old, mother of twins, suggested the health problems of people living in poverty as a research focus. Rachel suffers from various health issues such as diabetes, and she thinks that her health is deteriorating as a result of the emotional stress of a life in poverty.

> Eight months ago I had surgery. They found a herniated disc in my neck. It's really funny that the doctors think that my back pain comes from physical work. I do not do any physical work and still I suffer from terrible pain back. My doctor always say that the reason behind my health issues is stress. This is my second surgery. I have vertebral overload because I can not give my children what they want. For me this is the reason of my pain…both mental and physical… And here is the result.

Rachel wanted to focus the research on the physical and psychological price of poverty. Each participant shared her personal story with the group. The themes varied from the financial aspects of poverty to the more emotional and intimate spheres of life. The discussions created a sense of community, solidarity and identification. The process of sharing their personal stories created a sense of resonance within the group, but also showed how each participant experienced her struggles with poverty in a way that was uniquely hers. The emergent theme was to delve into the "price of poverty", a broad theme which still allowed each one to see the relevance to the various issues related to her personal story life.

Personalizing the price: documenting my life in poverty

Once the research topic was defined, participants started collecting data by reaching out and taking pictures related to the research questions: What is the price of poverty? How do I, personally, experience the price of poverty? What are the ways in which people confront

the price of poverty? Most of the pictures express concrete hardship such as pictures of a house ceiling dripping, a frugal dinner served to a child, a broken window and filthy sidewalks. The data-collecting process intensified the sense of despair that poverty aroused in the participants' life stories. At the end of the data collection stage, the group met several times, at which point they selected a number of pictures to be printed, discussed the alternative and possible interpretations and what texts the group wanted attached to them. The images selected by participants reflected what they considered the price of poverty, images that symbolize the ways in which different participants experience poverty in their lives. Aviva took a picture of her young son's rain boots which were completely torn. Aviva describes a situation in which she was unable to purchase new shoes for her son and during a period of rain the kindergarten teacher yelled at her because her child's feet were wet. Maha took pictures of children in the education system. She demonstrated that there is nothing more important in life than the education of her children. However, the education system does not provide equal opportunity for children who come from poor homes. Participants revealed enormous amounts of creativity, and alongside with their personal stories they created a collective yet still very personal documentation of the phenomenon under study.

Exposing knowledge: going public

A few weeks after finalizing the data collection and discussing the main findings and conclusions of their research, the group was invited to present the project at the Israeli Parliament (Knessset) in Jerusalem during a special session held in conjunction with the United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. The event is organized annually by anti-poverty and social rights organizations in Israel to promote social awareness of the need to eradicate poverty and destitution worldwide, particularly in developing countries. The participants received the invitation with great excitement. They saw it as an opportunity to present their knowledge to policymakers as well as the media. However, due to bureaucratic issues, namely, that the presentation of visual material in the Parliament requires a special permit, a stipulation that the organizers of the event were unaware of it, the women were unable to present their work. This caused a feeling of great disappointment among the participants. Ultimately, the research exhibition was presented at the Haifa Community Theater Festival, an annual public event attended by hundreds of people. This event signalled a turning point in the research process. The participants were very anxious as they were acutely aware that the process of knowledge dissemination requires both personal and public disclosure, and the time had come for the latter. For many of the participants, the act of disclosing the knowledge accrued during the study enabled them to re-assess the significance of their participation and learning. Aviva refers to their insights garnered during their first experience of knowledge dissemination:

> When we saw the exhibition again and had to explain our findings to the public it became clear that poverty has multiple aspects and consequences, far beyond the economic factors. It includes the environmental context of poverty and the personal process experienced by the individual as a result of being poor.

For Aviva, as for other participants, the experience of becoming public was an extremely significant one. Yael, an activist in the program who did not take part in the research study, came to the festival in which the exhibition was launched, and took an active part in the event. Yael was surprised by the reaction of the public to the exhibition:

The visual dimension of the exhibition was very powerful. Sometimes the cry of people living in poverty is like the cry of child. Society says …Oh poor child. You fell down…It's fine….Take aspirin…A photo is different…It is a fact… It's like you go and see the child cry in X-rays. It is a fracture.

Yael saw, as other participants did, the equation of the visual with the real. Participants gained a sense of being able, for the first time, to embody the complexity of their lives in poverty in a real manner. Similarly, the process of disseminating their knowledge created for the group a sense of recognition. Standing in front of hundreds of people who visited different exhibitions, attending to the questions of the public, listening to the reaction of visitors, all removed poverty from the sphere of personal failure and placed it in the sphere of the social and the political.

Participants experienced the process of knowledge dissemination with a sense of personal involvement. Aviva describes her personal experience when her immediate job supervisor came to observe the exhibition. At the beginning she was very embarrassed by the situation. At the end of the event however, the supervisor approached her and expressed her appreciation for Aviva's courage to show her pictures. Earlier, Aviva shared that she had been highly criticized by close relatives for exposing herself as a woman living in poverty. According to them the exposure may harm the privacy of her children. After this incident, Aviva expressed her total confidence in her choice, and that the project actually increased her sense of self-worth.

My boss was crying. I'm new in this job…she said "Aviva, you are a very strong woman …don't be ashamed to expose yourself."

Contrarily, her friends and relatives were less happy and supportive. Aviva relating a relative's reaction:

Aviva, you have disgraced your family. Your children are not angry at you? How did you do that to them? I said, this is what it is. This is the reality of poverty. They know that this exposure reached many people and helped them to understand me much better, like my boss, she talks to me today in a different way, with much more respect.

The process of public dissemination turned into a dynamic and creative process in which participants enacted new meaning to their lived experiences. Also, the disclosure of knowledge to the general public allowed the group to observe critically the way in which they as individuals are perceived by the people who came to experience the exhibition.

Making research matters for social change

The participants agreed that their research had a powerful impact on many areas including increasing public awareness, transforming participants' views of research, affecting participants' perception of the problem, reframing participants' story lives, and changing perceptions of academy–community partnership.

Increasing public awareness: an eye is an eye

Participants witnessed the strong reactions of the public who attended the exhibition. They all saw the powerful impression that the pictures and texts had generated in the visitors. However, they were very skeptical of the scope of the research's impact on a larger scale.

Most people who were exposed to their exhibition came from a middle-class background and for them it was just a single experience whereas for participants it is a real life. Maggie explains:

> An eye is an eye. It sees what it wants to see. They see something different to what we see. Some were touched and silent, others asked questions, other stared at the exhibition like nothing moved them. Some of them said it was shocking. You cannot expect from people who are better off to understand what we understand. We put our soul and our life into each picture.

Ruthy agreed with Maggie. But she is also skeptical about the effect of the exhibition on the consciousness of the public:

> I am not sure it has any effect. I took some pictures of the neglected and dirty sidewalks in my neighborhood but no one came and asked where it is, nobody came and called the authorities to take care of the problems. We need to show these pictures to the right people.

In contrast, Maha disagrees with Ruthy. She thinks that research can bring about change. She took pictures of her house's deplorable conditions and voiced that representatives of the governmental authorities on housing who visited the exhibition promised to present her case to the Ministry of Housing. After the exhibition, some municipal agents came to her house and offered help to fix the roof. After the many years of frustration due to the lack of authorities' response and awareness of her housing problems, Maha considers the exhibition a success, in that it had an important impact on the way issues of poverty are handled by the social agencies, at least those who came to the exhibition. Overall, participants agreed that the phase of dissemination and exposure was very significant. The research helped participants to break the silence that characterizes a life in poverty. It allowed them to reach out and gain public attention to their messages and in this way transcend the limits of personal distress.

Shifting participants' views of research: images don't lie

Participants shared the idea that visual research is an important way to transmit social knowledge. Even those who were highly skeptical at the beginning of the project, in time were convinced about the effectiveness of visual research as a tool of impact on the social images of the public. Maha refers to the ability of photography to convey a message by nonverbal means which gives irrefutable testimony of social problems:

> I learned what photos can do. You don't need to shout to convey a message of the problems that we suffer. Sometimes people say that there is not such a thing as poverty. That there is not such a thing as homeless people…Images don't lie.

Aviva conveyed views comparable to Maha's. Like other participants in the study, Maha conveyed that the visual research may help people voice their claims. She said:

> The camera knows me. I got to know myself through the camera. She spoke in my name.

Maggie addressed her personal connection with visual research methodology. She believes that through visual research people like her can reflect a complex reality that words cannot transmit. In her opinion, the camera expresses the inner perspective of the

photographer. Maggie sees photography as a tool of personal and social empowerment, as well as a bridge to dialogue with the viewer.

> Pictures speak a lot. Each one sees different. They reflect a world. A good picture is worth more than a thousand words. I found myself through the pictures I presented in the research. I talked through them and they talked to me. I believe the research strengthened us. It touched the heart of so many people. Our pictures stirred up the issue of poverty significantly.

The members of the academic staff engaged in the project expressed how the visual research had a strong impact on participants. Itamar, a social work student, who took part in the group research activities, highlights the impressive change the research process had on the participants:

> I learned that pictures can express the personal stories of the group. I noticed that the use of photography helps the participants to explore their motivations and fears. I learned that visual research through photography opens many options of expression, increases creativity and can express different sides of the story. This methodology can open the door for a real contribution of people living in poverty and exclusion to the development of knowledge.

Like Itamar, Neta, a program coordinator, chose to address the likely contribution of visual research methodology in promoting social change. Neta refers to the potential capacity of the methodology to change public images, stigma, and social prejudices through visual evidence:

> Prejudice against the poor is nothing unusual even among professionals who deal with people in poverty… Precisely because of these negative views, we need to express our views, to show what we know, our "life knowledge". Knowledge that comes from life is so important to change these negative perceptions, that kind of knowledge is the only one that can change basic attitudes, can create a higher level of social consciousness. This knowledge can change much more than academic lectures or theories.

Participants agreed that their engagement in the process of knowledge development has shifted their view of research once seen as something remote and inaccessible for them as women living in poverty.

Discussion

The article raises the need to increase community access to knowledge development in the context of university–community partnerships. It describes a case study based on participatory visual action research and assesses the contribution of this methodology to democratizing the processes of knowledge production, especially in the context of unbalanced power relations between universities and excluded communities (Appadurai 2006). The study identified four main themes: negative views of academic research, engaging the community in research, exposing knowledge and the impact of the research on social change. Findings show that participants perceived academic research as an exclusionary practice and the academy as an aloof and elitist institution. They were initially very hesitant to take part in the project. On the other hand, the women also expressed

their desire to share with the public what they called "true knowledge", knowledge that comes from their personal experience. The findings reinforce the criticism leveled against the poverty research agenda which does not reflect the experiences and hopes of people living in poverty but rather responds to the interests of academic and government institutions. In other words, poverty research reflects the interests of the non-poor (Baker Collins 2005; Hutto et al. 2011; Peck 2007; Peck and Segal 2008). The findings are consistent with the calls to recognize existing knowledge among people living in poverty as a source of primary academic knowledge (Creese and Frisby 2011; Krumer-Nevo 2005). The study results indicate that community-based visual action research methodology may increase accessibility to knowledge development processes of marginalized groups. This methodology provided a place to create a language more accessible to different audiences, a less exclusionary one. The results confirm that visual qualitative methodology allowed participants to critically view the daily reality in which they live, contributed to the creation of new knowledge, promoted dialogue around the topics investigated and helped to present information to policy makers (Wang and Burris 1997). This methodology allowed participants to reflect on their personal lives and to re-compose their story lives in light of the new knowledge they personally and collectively created. The findings confirm studies that show that participants' engagement in processes of knowledge development enhanced their personal and group commitment to publicly disseminate the findings and to advocate for the implementation of their recommendations (Nykiforuk et al. 2011). The findings highlight as well the potential of the community as a rich source of knowledge development and the need to develop unique methodologies for deepening participation and accessibility of groups and communities usually excluded from academic research. Alongside, the study also raised several questions including the responsibility of researchers in the dissemination of knowledge. Participants were well aware of the issue of the multiple interpretations that can be made of any individual photo, and they also expressed concern about presenting their visual testimonies to a mainly middle class audience. Researchers need to plan audience activities, whereby they anticipate questions related to the dynamics of recognition and misrecognition that such exhibits may give rise to. In addition, the study unfolded the tension between the need to make the research a personal and contextualized testimony and the ethical principle to respect community members' request to remain anonymous by de-personalizing and de-contextualizing the visual material. The study also raised multiple ethical dilemmas that characterize participatory action research (Maiter et al. 2008). These processes involve the personal exposure of the study population (Thomas and O'Kane 1998). All research, and participatory research in particular, aims to maintain the rule of "informed consent," although it sometimes proves difficult in the complex process of mirroring all aspects that should be taken into account in the research process (Renold et al. 2008). Therefore, it is of high importance to protect participants through group discussions on this topic, giving participants control over the degree of personal exposure, and keeping anonymity. Research, which is always a contested construct, should be negotiated. As such, informed consent should also be discussed and re-negotiated during all the different stages of the research process (Creese and Frisby 2011). The negotiation should disclose the presence of clear hierarchies between academic and community researchers and the impact of power inequalities in the achievement of informed consent. Moving towards a more just and equal relationship between university and community researchers, which is the focus of this article, requires that traditional notions of informed consent be interrupted. Academic researchers should strive to make the knowledge of the oppressed a legitimate source of knowing. This task requires a genuine relationship with community researchers, e.g.

"relations that support and work in solidarity with the oppressed who are already engaging in transforming an unjust reality" (Boggan and Butterwick 2004, pp. 241).

In sum, the study shows that participants changed their negatives views of research as something that belongs to the elite. This study highlighted the community's ability to produce knowledge, which is both effective and relevant to the lives of its people. Findings indicate the need to develop more inclusive, action-oriented and accessible methods for knowledge production which may encourage academic institutions to share with the community the power of knowledge development. This development poses major challenges and promising opportunities for universities and communities in the context of future partnerships.

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