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Food on the Margins: A Creative Film Collaboration to Amplify the Voices of those Living with Food Insecurity

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Link to Documentary film here: <https://vimeo.com/352716913>

Abstract

'Food on the margins in Plymouth' is a short 'fly on the wall' style documentary film which has captured the food stories of six individuals who are, for whatever reason, experiencing food insecurity. The film was inspired by a recent participatory food research project (Food as a Lifestyle Motivator (FLM) - Pettinger et al 2017; 2018; 2019) which aimed to explore creative methods to better understand the food experiences of vulnerable communities in Plymouth UK.

Our aim was to 'co-produce' a documentary film illustrating the realities of the lived experience of food insecurity that could be promoted by/to city leaders and policy makers to catalyse food system change. The resulting documentary film successfully met its aim by presenting a work of public sociology that informs publics about food poverty. Here, within this 'Beyond the Text' companion piece, we critique and appraise what the film achieves, by proposing how and why film-making can engage publics through sharing food stories and conveying wider sociological discourses.

‘Co-produced’ participatory film-making for public sociology

Film-making has a rich history in humanities research and successful documentary films use compelling stories to influence positive individual and environmental changes (Brandt et al 2016). The power of moving images to raise consciousness among viewers leading to changes in thinking and/or behaviour have political potency (Whiteman, 2004) and can have far reaching social impact (Karlin and Johnson, 2011).

Story telling is known to be a powerful way of making sense of life - ‘putting life into words’ (Baldwin, 2005). Digital storytelling strengthens solidarity and can help to create a greater role in community change and to understand cultures differently by way of filmed stories (Gubrium and Harper, 2016). Food stories in particular, have an essential role in revealing the important place of narratives in generating new knowledge. The deeper understanding that emerges from close attention being paid to hearing and interpreting people’s food stories can offer alternative ways to understand the lived experience of food insecurity (O-Kane and Pamphilon, 2015) and build a more collective voice that can democratise the food system (Cachelin et al 2019).

Our documentary used a ‘fly on the wall’ style ‘participatory’ film approach. Providing meaningful participatory engagement opportunities, through creative projects such as film-making, can offer skills development that can transfer power in the process (Williams et al 2020). This process provided our participants ‘permission’ (agency) to share their authentic food narratives, to convey their lived experiences, thus consolidating our understanding of the consequences of diverse and complex lives, often involving mental health issues. This is what DeSouza (2019, p22) describes as ‘neoliberal stigma’ - a concept which considers the wider contemporary political and economic contexts in which the voices of the hungry are foregrounded as they emerge within systems, organisations and other voices of privilege. The participants’ narratives amplify their circumstances, yet challenge *our* commonly held assumptions as researchers on the location of knowledge, which aligns with the principles of social constructionism (Gergen and Gergen, 2015).

This film offers a topical and highly relevant output that falls within the tradition of (organic) ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005), defined as an attempt to ‘make visible the invisible’ thus ‘validating the organic connections’ with and to our publics. Burawoy warns, however, that we have a lot to learn about engagement techniques, as we reflected during our film making processes, which raised some emotional and ethical challenges. Participatory approaches recognise that we are all able to utilise a range of methodologies to investigate, analyse and come to terms with new knowledge (People’s Knowledge, 2016: 2). This supports constructivist assertions that subjective and inter-subjective social knowledge is co-constructed collectively by participants *and* researchers (O-Kane and Pamphilon, 2015), with potential to inform policy recommendations (Kreiling and Paunov 2021). The voices of people with lived experience of food insecurity *should* become a priority for integrated food policy research and action.

This 'co-produced' film offers the opportunity to share knowledge and dialogue, both essential expressions of the lived experience of poverty towards political change and transformation (Freire, 1970). Our film showcases the utility of more progressive creative approaches that can offer deeper practices, permitting academics to be more intimately associated with their publics (Burowoy, 2005), which aligns with more authentic public engagement endeavours (See Pettinger et al, 2019 p9). 'Co-production' and 'co-creation' methodologies are emerging as important approaches in food systems research (e.g. FoodSEqual, 2020) because they are thought to facilitate both creative and inclusive collaborations with multiple stakeholders to produce innovative, community-identified responses and solutions (Kreiling and Paunov, 2021). Yet the use of the term 'stakeholder' here is misleading as often neglects to include those vulnerable and marginal citizens, such as our film participants. This calls into question our full appreciation of the concept of 'co-production' (see Williams et al 2020) and, on reflection, its possible misappropriation of use within the case of our film (?)

During the film making process, we attempted to fully acknowledge our position of privilege and power, alongside the sensitivities, complexities and stigmatizing nature of food insecurity within our participants. Yet the ethics of participation remained a challenge for me as a researcher, with emerging emotional labour, expressed as deep anxieties around the wellbeing (and vulnerability) of our participants during the making of the film. Emotion is integral to methodological processes not least because it is part of everyone's life and emotional expression within the research process is often data in itself (see Pettinger et al 2018, p7). Drawing on an 'ethic of care' (Tronto, 1993), therefore, and maintaining caring interactions was vital to emphasize the moral interdependences between researcher and participants to build trusted relationships (Fink and Lomax, 2016, p30) and required ongoing reflexivity, ethical critique and emotional support during (and beyond) the film-making processes.

Film launch and impact

Before promoting our film, we attempted to have anticipatory conversations with our participants about the film (Fink and Lomax, 2018) to manage potential challenges, discrimination and even exclusion. This also aligns with the participatory elements of the process (Telo, 2013). Sadly, we were only able to locate two of the six participants before the launch event. But on careful discussion with the gatekeeper organisations, we went ahead with the launch.

The film has been highly impactful, reaching a wide public audience and continues to be used regularly as a knowledge exchange resource, by public health practitioners, educators and non-government organisations alike. Its greatest impact has been its inclusion as evidence within a 'Food System transformation' research project (FoodSEqual, 2020). Firstly, it has contributed to transdisciplinary learnings from the processes of effective participatory

engagement, which raises political questions about the kinds of realities that researchers are contributing to through their chosen methods (West and Schill, 2022). Secondly, film sections were used within project benchmarking work, supporting data collection to map lived experiences of food insecurity. It could be said, therefore, that the food stories of our film participants are indirectly already contributing to the early stages of food system transformation (?)

Post-script

We modified the film a year after launch, to acknowledge COVID-19 and the lockdowns, which 'shone a light' further on the precarity of our food system. We also added a dedication to one of the film's participants, who died of a drug overdose in 2020. This tragic event, once again, called into question our ethical code. But on liaising with his family and service providers (also in the film), we gained 'consent' to publish a personal dedication to Danny within the film credits, who's participation was down to his wanting to make a difference to society, as exemplified by his incredibly poignant narrative across the film. This latter event echoes the concept of generativity, ie wanting to help others (Parsons 2018), yet also confirms the irony of a broken system and infrastructure that fails the people most in need.

Conclusion

The film's focus was on raising issues around inequalities of access in the UK's (broken) industrial food system. It reinforces how individuals are being failed by our food system, not only affecting their health and wellbeing but also exacerbating their lived experiences of poverty and oppression. As a digital, open access output, our documentary film is an accessible way of amplifying the voices of six individuals in Plymouth who are, for whatever reason, experiencing food insecurity. It permits the sharing of knowledge, information and research findings with publics that informs future practice and policy. Action planning *with* individuals and communities, including the sharing of such food dialogues between publics and decision-makers, are important next steps towards build community capacity and informing both integrated food policy and social justice discourses. The film also serves as a tool with which we can critically reflect on our ethical-political research practices (West and Schill, 2022) and the realities (challenges) of engaging participants transparently in creative methods.

Participatory film-making has abundant potential for social transformation and to challenge more traditional research paradigms. I continue to explore its utility within the context of food system transformation research. By bringing such creative methods alongside more traditional ones and using continuous reflexivity and an ethic of care, we can challenge our own assumptions and privilege. We can also enrich our collaborative working, bringing critical rigour to 'co-production' research approaches and authenticity to social justice discourses. We believe this film has potential to continue engaging publics through sharing

important food stories and conveying wider sociological discourses that can build community capacity, resilience and social capital.

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