

Using Qualitative Tools as Interventionist Research Strategies for Emancipation

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Abstract

As much as South African struggles for freedom and transformation can be termed emancipatory, not all attempts to research and record them can be similarly described. This article documents the research methods employed in a qualitative study that followed 80, mostly Black students, over 5 years in order to document the struggles to succeed faced by students in South Africa. The study ultimately interrogated the centrality of race in the quest for education and emancipation with a view toward understanding what drives self-determination and success in universities. A central intention of the study was for it to be research as intervention through the use of conscious research methods that would contribute to developing agency and action among students. Each of the participatory methods chosen, it was hoped, would contribute toward helping students develop wider networks and self-reflectivity in a quest for success in university. The five interactive methods used included an annual in-depth participant interview, social network interviews with an array of peers and stakeholder, a Facebook weblog to which participations made written and photographic submissions, a written reflection at the end of the fifth year, and an autoethnographic documentary in which participation was optional. Each of these activities was designed to have outcomes which can be described to varying extents as participatory and/or emancipatory.

Keywords

emancipatory research, methods in qualitative inquiry, arts-based methods, participatory action research (PAR), critical theory

Introduction

Emancipation, transformation, and participation have long been at the center of South Africa's struggles for freedom and new ways of being. In particular, students, staff, and government have been involved in trying to transform South Africa's institutions of higher education. These struggles are historical and contemporary, as well as practical and ideological. There have been several important books written and qualitative studies conducted in response to these emancipatory struggles (Case, Marshall, McKenna, & Mogashana, 2018; Erasmus & de Wet, 2003; Letseka, Cosser, Breier, & Visser, 2010; Moorosi & Moletsane, 2009; Tabensky & Matthews, 2015). Erasmus and de Wet (2003), in their study on "race" and "racism" at the University of Cape Town's Medical School, confirm that some students have difficulty naming race and experiences related to race and "tend to downplay encounters with "race" that are hurtful and/or reinforce racialised relations of power" (p. iv). Moorosi and Moletsane (2009) narrate how young women's experiences in higher education institutions point to the lack of recognition given to gender as a barrier in everyday university life. Letseka, Cosser, Breier, and Visser (2010) and

Tabensky and Matthews (2015) look at barriers to student retention and oppressive institutional cultures, respectively. The Case, Marshall, McKenna, and Mogashana (2018) study reports on in-depth interviews with 73 young people who first entered university studies in South Africa some 6 years beforehand. Key among its findings was how individual agency seems to mediate both opportunities and constraints for young people at university.

The qualitative studies mentioned above all use conventional in-depth interviews or focus groups. While the outcome of such studies are emancipatory, the methods used are not particularly so. In these processes, the participant does not necessarily have ongoing involvement in the research process, they are not active cocreators of the knowledge, nor are they

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involved in “the dissemination of knowledge about themselves and/or about institutions and systems within which they live and work” (Lynch, 2000, p. 87). These are the kinds of practices that emancipatory research demands because “the idea of having voice and of giving voice is central to enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation” (Fournier, Mill, Kipp, & Walusimbi, 2007, p. 15). Indeed, emancipatory theories reinforce Southern traditions and studies that propose an emancipatory framework (Dennis, 2016; Fournier et al., 2007; Kendall, Marshall, & Barlow, 2013; Newton & Burgess, 2008) are conscious of and intentional about participant-centered storytelling. In this manner, participatory research moves “beyond rhetoric to emancipation for all those involved, including researchers” (Kendall et al., 2013, p. 12) and also links the development of action with emancipation (Newton & Burgess, 2008). Freire (1970) reminds us that it is not enough for the oppressed to recognize their own oppression but that as Carr and Kemmis (1986) point out, emancipatory action research leads the group involved to “take responsibility for its own emancipation from the dictates of irrationality, injustice, alienation, and unfulfillment” (p. 30). Studies that purport to use an emancipatory framework understand that emancipation has to do with consciousness raising, awareness of new possibilities, and an understanding of structural barriers, policies, and practices typical of the institution in which participants find themselves (Fournier et al., 2007).

Very little data collected on student struggles has adopted self-consciously participant-centered qualitative research methodologies. By this, we mean methodologies that are both agential and emancipatory to the people whose lives they are meant to benefit, beyond the life span of any given project. Lynch reminds us that “no matter how radical the knowledge may be, its transformative potential is far from self-evident unless it is available and disseminated in assessable form to those about whom it is written or whose lives are affected by it” (Lynch, 2000, p. 95). While the works of Mitchell et al. (2005), and Moletsane et al. (2007) and (2009); Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, and van der Ruit (2012); Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014); and Sutherland (2007) have made noteworthy contributions, there remains a dearth of participatory work (including visual methods) that is equally sensitive to reinforcing an emancipatory ethos in participants.

The study described in this article attempts to highlight the effects of social conditions on young people and documents individual biographies in relation to macrosocietal forces (Cohen & Ainley, 2000). In keeping with sociocultural theory, the study emphasizes local contexts and youth agency in relation to powerful structural forces, providing youth with opportunities to voice challenges they face in their own words (Blackman, 2005; Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Dimitriadis, 2008; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006) because healthy youth development is tied to young people’s need to be “agents” in their stories and successes. Such an analysis, on what various scholars have termed emancipatory, participatory, and interventionist approaches (see, e.g., Lynch, 1999; Swartz, 2011; Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018), is seldom applied to a current case

study in which multiple methods are attempted to ensure emancipatory or interventionist outcomes.

It is not up to us to decide whether or not students found their involvement in our study to be emancipatory. Rather, we have to rely on what we can glean from student’s reflections to our five participatory and interventionist methodologies. Since emancipation is tricky to measure, we know emancipation has happened when students express how they have been changed over time as a result of their engagement with the study, its stimuli, with researchers themselves, and through the research that they themselves took on, in the form of social network interviews (SNIs). In view of that, this article will discuss the five ways we endeavored to make the research emancipatory, offering study excerpts that detail student’s reactions.

Students were able to articulate how they might have improved or been tested in their efforts to develop a network, increase their social capital through connecting with peers and adults for social support, and information sharing through piloting SNIs and the Facebook weblog. Finally, students were able to share their stories in autoethnographic form through taking part in a documentary. Over time, through the reciprocal engagement enabled by annual participant interviews (APIs), participants began to control the “naming . . . defining . . . and interpreting of their own world” (Lynch, 1999, p. 58). By inspiring reflexivity guided by ideologies of independent engagement and a commitment to change, we are able to demonstrate why a 5-year methodology was emancipatory.

Background

Set in universities, the student-centered study focus of this article asked “what obstacles are students facing and what are they, along with their institutions doing about these problems?” The study titled, *Race, Education and Emancipation: A Five-Year Longitudinal, Qualitative Study of Agency and Obstacles to Success Amongst Higher Education Students in a Sample of South African Universities* aimed to follow a cohort of students from eight universities on their journey through university.¹ The study began in 2013 with a total of 80 participants across eight universities, who would be followed over 5 years. Of these, 66 were Black African (South African) students, 3 were Black students from elsewhere on the African continent, 6 were colored students, 2 were Indian students, and 6 were White students.² We lost contact with 11 students over the period of 5 years and by the close of the study, 27 students had graduated, 35 students had not yet completed their course, and 7 left to work or to look for work opportunities before completing their degrees.

The study’s design and questions were delineated according to three themes: structural and social factors, intersecting identities, and agency and opportunities. Stories were gathered through creative and innovative elicitation methods that involved student participation in SNIs, APIs conducted by researchers, students self-documenting experiences through Facebook weblogs, student’s written reflections in the final

year of the study, and a documentary film featuring a number of the students as the concluding intervention.

At the beginning of the study, one Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) researcher was assigned to 10 student participants from the same university. That researcher would be responsible for maintaining contact with these students during the year through regular telephonic updates, text messages, and, of course, the APIs. Researchers and participants formed real connections and it was not unheard of for participants to text message their assigned researcher throughout the course of the year to either share an accomplishment or a problem—there was symbiotic effort and consideration fostered by the partnership. This reciprocity enabled a certain level of trust, democracy, and equality between the researcher and the research subject: “reciprocity demands that the research enables people to know and control their own world . . . this takes time, trust and negotiation” (Lynch, 2000, p. 89).

Conceptually, the study was framed using theory that acknowledges South Africa’s history and recognizes that students’ capacity to succeed at university remains mediated by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Thus, the intersecting theoretical concepts through which the study was designed and analyzed include critical race theory; sociological notions of capitals, understandings of structural and symbolic violence; and theories of agency and emancipation. Critical race theory was employed to highlight how the intersection of multiple social identities impact student experiences (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011; Savas, 2014; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000, 2002). An analysis of different forms of capitals allowed us to discern the many forms of capital required for success, linking economic, cultural, and social capital structures to inequalities, while emphasizing the individual in larger systemic influences (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Farmer, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Swartz, Harding, & De Lannoy, 2012). Finally, theories of agency and emancipation (Lynch, 1999, 2000; Schatzki, 2002) enabled us to focus on the roles that students’ individual and collective agency play in relation to larger structural influences in the form of university leadership, state policies, and governance.

Method

Upon approval of the study by the HSRC Ethics Committee (HSRC Research Ethics Committee Protocol No. REC 12/20/02/13), the relevant university authorities were contacted, introduced to, and invited to be a part of the study. Following that, each university performed internal ethical reviews of the study, eventually giving written permission for the study to commence. After receiving written permission, researchers made preliminary visits to their individual universities to perform a weeklong rapid ethnography (Handwerker, 2001).³ At the same time, three formative focus groups were being administered at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of Cape Town (UCT), and University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) in effort to finalize the research instruments. A

different cohort of students participated in the preliminary focus groups than those who would eventually be recruited into the 5-year study. The preliminary focus group activated the emancipatory process, in that we were interested in the outcomes of these focus groups that would later shape the research instruments to reflect the language used by students. The 80 students who would eventually participate in the longitudinal study were recruited, with permission granted by university authorities, via strategically placed posters on the university campuses, electronic flyers, and social media. Finally, volunteers were vetted and nominated as study participants according to their demographic criteria.

By approving their participation in the study and consenting, students were agreeing to:

1. An annual in-depth interview, every year for 5 years (between 1 and 2 hr).
2. A monthly Facebook weblog ongoing for 5 years.
3. Use of the cellular phones given to them to document agentic moments and critical events or obstacles. The purpose of the phones was (a) an incentive for partaking in the study, (b) a means for students to stay in touch, (c) a means to receive communication about the study, (d) to upload content on the Facebook weblog, and (e) to later record social network interviews. Every month, the phones were recharged with credit to ensure productive engagement in the study.
4. Conduct, with preparation but unsupervised, a sequence of social network interviews with members of their community, university, and peer group.
5. Those who participated in the documentary all had to re-consent to coming out from behind the usual veil of research anonymity.

Confidentiality of students’ identities was upheld by labeling them according to their race, sex, age, university, degree course, and the year in which the interview was done. So, a designation to a quote such as “BF_33_UFHSTUD6_BAdmin_2016” means Black female, aged 33, from the University of Fort Hare, student code number 6, studying toward a bachelor of administration degree, with the quote coming from an interview conducted in 2016.

Introducing the Methods

Lynch (1999) puts forward an emancipatory research methodology that promotes the centering of research subjects so that they become agential in the research, bringing about transformative effects. In this reciprocal engagement, the participant is encouraged to exercise agency and ownership over knowledge produced about them and their lived experience, so that they both understand and are empowered to change their situation, through the research process. This ethos is particularly significant for research in the area of inequality because doing anything otherwise reinforces inequality.

The remainder of the article will describe how each of the five methods used in the study constitutes emancipatory research, while briefly sharing students' responses to each element. This will be followed by a discussion of the methods alongside conceptual frameworks, a discussion of the study's limitations, and will end with ideas for further research and dissemination.

SNIs

Social network interviewing (Swartz & Bhana, 2009) is an experimental research and interventionist instrument. SNIs were intended to provide a template for young people to engage with community members on issues relevant to both parties. The purpose of the SNIs was to first gather support data for the study and then, to help students cultivate a network by encouraging them to talk to other students (unlike them) and university employees. Each participant was tasked with interviewing seven people in the following categories:

- a person from your hometown who never went to university,
- a student (or person) you consider more privileged than you,
- a student (person) you consider less privileged than you,
- a person who works at student support services,
- a student who dropped out of university this past year,
- a person you consider to have helped you over this last year at university (or life), and
- a recent graduate that you know.

Questions for each category were provided to the participant and each year, the participant engaged with their researcher on how they found the social networking exercise. In 2015, CPUTSTUD3 already recognized the function of the SNIs stating, "there is learning purpose in it, first of all—and it's just not about, a random survey, it's about students - us the students and how we [sic] supposed to see the world."

SNIs were conducted for the first 3 years of the study. The first 2 years resulted in some good data but not enough interviews. Students were somewhat reluctant to conduct interviews, especially with university stakeholders because of the time it took to do so, and because they felt underequipped to do so. They also frequently misplaced cell-phone recordings or the loose papers on which they took notes. The third year was a greater success as each participant was assigned a bound booklet in which to conduct their interviews, with a cash incentive reward for every interview completed. Consequently, SNIs were stopped in 2016 because enough data were collected between 2013 and 2015. Although students described several challenges with conducting SNIs—laziness, introversion, structural barriers, and time constraints—most participants stayed dedicated to and eager about doing the interviews and we were able gain insight from the SNIs.

Over time, several students found it to be a useful exercise that inspired identification and information sharing:

I was lazy to do the interviews but then once I started it became more than just interviewees. I gained interest in wanting to know, what exactly people are doing, it was very emotional . . . I got to hear what students are thinking. (BF_21_ULSTUD9_LL2015)

Uhm I learnt a lot . . . because I had to interview a different spectrum of people. I got exposed to things I wouldn't normally think of, you understand. (BM_22_ULSTUD4_BA_2015)

What I notice is that most student face financial struggles you know . . . And you get to see that you are not the only person who is going through it. (BF_23_UJSTUD8_BA_2015)

Students were able to articulate how the SNIs were both interventionist and agential, like CPUTSTUD4 who interviewed personnel at a student counseling center and shared the following reflection:

When I went to student counselling . . . she told me that some of the things that stop us student's succeeding—it's the fact that we do not use the school resources. Some of us don't even know that some of those things exist. (BF_20_CPUTSTUD4_BSc_2015)

Put differently this student, similar to several others, asserts that she changed her help-seeking behavior as a result of realizations evoked by carrying out SNIs. SNIs became a way for the participants to reflect on their own life experiences through others' stories. Our intention with the SNI—and what made them emancipatory—was that students would move beyond merely listening to a story and that the story would encourage them to think or do things differently. This change can be as big as accessing a specific service on campus or as small as finding the courage to ask a question in class for instance.

We identified a number of ways in which social network interviewing can be adopted by universities to potentially increase social, symbolic, and cultural capital. First students should be required to participate in SNIs from the beginning of their university journey. Second, students should receive adequate training on how to conduct interviews to ensure greater ease and comfort. Third, students should be recognized and rewarded for their participation through operational incentives. Similar to the SNIs, the Facebook weblog was intended to enable a feeling of identification and community and to support in the attainment of these forms of capital.

The Facebook Weblog

A private Facebook group called "Who Succeeds, Who Doesn't?" was created in order for participants (mediated by a researcher) to comment or upload a photograph once a month that represents what has made them feel successful or discouraged at university that month. What we found was that the weblog was not only a useful instrument for collecting data but, that is, was valuable for maintaining a relationship between participants and researchers as well as between participants at different institutions. For the most part, participants found this to be an enriching experience with UFHSTUD2 in 2014 expressing that the Facebook group became a way to interact with a wider student community where problems were

discussed and strategies to overcome problems were shared. The shared struggles conjured a sense of connectedness that students said made them feel relieved:

For me this project has been very interesting, especially the Facebook part of it because that's where you get to know people, that's where you get to interact with people, that's where you get to know that you are not the only one who is facing problems, but some overcome them, and some motivate us. (BF_21_UFHSTUD2_LLB_2014)

That's the best way to be honest, to connect with people on campus. I just feel like it's quick, easy and it's easier to be friends on Facebook than to be friends in real life so. (BF_31_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2014)

Yes it's helpful because . . . I feel like I am not alone but even in other universities, there are still the same challenges but we always motivate each other to focus. (BM_24_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2014)

You are never the only one . . . Someone is going through the exact same thing—that's what I realised. (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLB_2016)

The group was a platform on which students could get an instant response to a question, idea, or view, while for others, the group offered emotional reprieve. UJSTUD7 shares her experience about the functionality of the group, while NWUSTUD10 talks about it as a space to off-load emotionally and seek inspiration:

I was asking for new study methods and like tips on how to study and how to deal with workload stress and all of that. (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLB_2016)

Sometimes I will go to Facebook feeling all, just you know, there are some days you just feel down, and someone will write about their challenges and how they overcome them, just the motivational quote and stuff and I would be like okay, they bring you back . . . so it helps a lot. (BF_19_NWUSTUD10_BSocSc_2014).

Students also acknowledged the prospective social capital and network capacity the group offers, exemplified by ULSTUD8 who noted:

I have managed to gain more confidence about myself as I was interacting with different people. It also helped me gain more experience and more knowledge as people were commenting according to their understanding and it also gave me an idea of helping out other students who are struggling in terms of material and to encourage my home town learners to always do their level best in their studies.

In other words, this student recognized the capacity group members (and other young people outside of the study) have to really help one another—even after graduating—with information about bursaries, jobs, and internship opportunities for instance.

Although the Facebook weblog was active for 5 years, there were some inconsistencies and limitations. Some students were reluctant to join Facebook either because they found it

distracting or because they valued their privacy and anonymity. Other students felt discouraged when fellow group members did not post as often as they did or when they did not interact with the content posted. Other students confessed that they did “lurk” on the platform, that is, read posts without actively engaging by posting themselves, and a few students, mainly older students, admitted to not knowing how to use Facebook. In the future, perhaps alternate platforms similar to Facebook (but less contentious) might be more effective. For example, many universities now have intranets where course information, lecture notes, and general administration notices are posted. Such platforms could be formalized and made into student portal networks where similar peer group discussion is encouraged (mediated by a university official).

The next two sections detail our emancipatory findings through APIs and a final written reflection.

Marking Change Over Time Through an Annual Interview

The purpose of having APIs every year over 5 years was to specifically track any changing meanings of success, obstacles experienced with respect to accessing the new study year, and to discuss issues pertaining to race, class, language, gender, and student services. Through this 5-year engagement, a certain level of self-reflexivity was required and this is what made the APIs especially emancipatory. The passing of time meant that students were able to reflect on what they could have done differently in the previous year to realize their university goals and how they can work toward improving future results. Universities could formally adopt a similar model of self-appraisal where students reflect on their performance over the year and the areas that need improvement. This kind of annual review better equips students with the tools they need to improve, the kind of action they need to be taking to increase productivity, and what resources and services their individual universities offer to help them improve (academically, psychosocially, etc.). This is an agential exercise, in that students themselves are able to better position themselves in how they progress through university.

The Final Written Reflection

In Year 5 of the study, students were given a final reflection worksheet that contained 13 questions. They were given 2 months to complete this questionnaire because we really wanted them to be afforded the time and space to carefully think through what their involvement in the study has meant. The worksheet asked that they reflect on what they have learned about themselves, how being a part of the study has helped them (or not), what they would do differently, and what advice they would offer to young people coming into university. The participants were curious to gain insight on how their responses to questions and strategies to approaching different aspects of university had changed from first year to the fifth year. We could not provide them a clear answer to these questions and so, a written reflection in many ways helped them

reach the answers themselves. We offered a cash incentive to those students that took the task seriously and submitted their worksheets. As a result, most of the students completed the worksheet and we ended up with knowledgeable and considered responses to each question.

Only two students wrote that they did not find their involvement in the study helpful at all—they did not offer reasons. Many students replied that in many ways, the APIs felt like compulsory self-introspection and they found that exercise to be helpful. Several students articulated the transformative quality of APIs stating:

This study helped me feel a little excited and anxious about my future by giving me a glimpse of my past—and how far I’ve come. (BF_23_CPUTSTUD2_BA_2017)

[I was] forced to reflect on my year and my positionality as a middle-class White male student at UCT (and in South Africa more broadly). (CM_23_UCTSTUD1_BSocSc_2017)

Students also mentioned that in a similar way to the Facebook weblog, the APIs served a therapeutic function because they could share their daily stresses which they found to be empowering and relieving:

The ability to talk openly about the things that students go through at university, which our parents don’t know of and don’t even understand. Our parents don’t understand the demands that our courses of study make, the only language they want to hear and understand is excellence . . . how you excel is of no consequence. (BF_23_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2017)

I was able to share my deepest secret, I ended up being relieved from stress. (BM_24_ULSTUD3_LLB_2017)

Beyond off-loading emotionally, APIs also presented students with helpful ways of problem-solving and for others, the longitudinal nature of the study, coupled with participatory interventions meant that they felt somewhat accountable, not only to themselves but to the researcher interviewing them every year.

Being part of this study also helped me in the sense that . . . I knew that I was going to be part . . . [of the study] until I graduate—it encouraged me to work hard actually, to ensure that I come back the following year to still be part of the study. (BF_25_UJSTUD8_BA_2017)

I got to reflect about myself each time [the researcher] came to visit because she will always use the last information I shared as my source of reference and that holds you accountable. (BF_35_UFHSTUD6_BAdmin_2017)

Does all of this mean that the study was emancipatory for students? Students have admitted to APIs being emancipatory in the manner that they could assess themselves and their academic performance while setting new aims and targets for themselves yearly. They have said that the SNIs were emancipatory because of the inspiring bonds formed with fellow peers and information shared with university personnel. The Facebook weblog had the potential to be a more consistent form of

the SNI as a space to network and share experiences and information. An important quality of the weblogs was the feeling that you were not alone in your struggles, which was somewhat emancipatory.

The Ready or Not! Documentary

The final aspect of the emancipatory methodology was the creation of an autoethnographic documentary film titled—*Ready or Not! Black Students’ Experiences of South African Universities*. In the spirit of emancipation, *Ready or Not!* offered participants direct involvement in the research process by giving voice and agency to students because “voice is important: how voice is expressed, how voice is informed, how our voice differs from dominant voices” (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015, p. 218). Students who participated in the documentary were given a platform to tell their stories about their university journey. The stories told in the documentary give us a living, breathing understanding of what it means to go through the South African university system of accessing, starting, staying, passing, stopping, swapping, returning, finishing, graduating, and working.

We decided to do a documentary because 3 years into the project, there was a realization that the data coming out of interviews were poignant and it felt imperative to share it with a wider network of students. While many South Africans are aware of the challenges and discriminations occurring at higher education institutions nationwide—even anecdotally—there is something about seeing and hearing the chilling testimony of students’ experience of discrimination and witnessing the celebration of their successes that has a real lasting effect. This methodology also presented an opening to explore the way research data is shared. A documentary gave us the opportunity to explore the possibilities of a “performative” social science that acts as an alternative to what can sometimes be the limitations in publications, long reports, conference presentations, or policy briefs. “A documentary is an aesthetic of knowledge transfer that synthesizes the arts and social science and looks towards (re)presentation in ways that embrace the humanness of social science” (Jones, 2006, p. 67). A documentary has the potential to create meaningful dialogue with a wider audience because it is dialogical in nature, “it transforms social science data into something not only welcoming and lively, but also even playful in ways that reflect the nature of human interactions, imagination and relationships” (Jones, 2006, p. 67).

Ready or Not! includes the testimony of 23 students from the group of 80 in the larger race, education, and emancipation study. The participants were voluntarily selected, they had to re-consent and we had to reapply for ethical permission as this was separate from the research activities outlined in the original study. The documentary was filmed at various university campuses across South Africa including Durban University of Technology and UKZN (Durban), University of Johannesburg (Johannesburg), North-West University (in Potchefstroom and Mafikeng), and University of Fort Hare (in Alice, Bhisho, and East London). There was a standard interview guide that was

used but specific questions were also designed for particular individuals, based on their background, university, and degree. We filmed some interviews individually while others were done in groups of two or three, providing an added layer of dialogue as students had both opposing and shared views, experiences, and strategies. All student participants involved have been sent the film and it is anticipated that they will be actively involved with the dissemination of this product over 2018 and 2019. Moreover, those involved, who have seen the film, recognize its potential to serve as a compelling account of the larger study's aims:

Firstly the documentary was beautiful . . . I hope what I and others contributions [sic] will have a positive outcome to what the study aimed to achieve. (BM_25_UFHSTUD3_BSocW_2018)

I think the documentary is a true reflection of student's experiences and challenges in university as it details their lived experience and how they relate to other students, academic staff, management and support staff. It also gives an insight of different views on racial representation in tertiary in an interesting way, I love it. (BF_24_NWUSTUD4_BA_2018)

I'm actually shocked I put myself out there that much. But I like what I've seen. (BF_27_UFHSTUD7_BSocSci_2018)

It made me dig deep within myself to see where I went wrong with my different university experiences and where the two universities that I attended also could have done better. (BF_24_UJSTUD2_BA_2018)

While it is important to disseminate the recommendations of the larger study to relevant stakeholders, the documentary also gives us an opportunity to disseminate the findings of the study directly to the people who entrusted us with access to their entire lives for 5 years: the students.

Discussion

Both the SNIs and Facebook weblogs facilitated the acquisition of social, symbolic, and cultural capitals by creating a community or network that supported identification, motivation, and information sharing in an interventionist and agential way by encouraging participants to talk to other students, community members, and university employees. Cultural capital was built by providing students with wider access to human resources that could aid in generating knowledge and the capacity to understand institutional requirements, information, and structures. Students were given insight into the function of symbolic capital—the notion that one's race, class, and gender create differential privilege and benefits at university—through ongoing APIs and through SNIs, especially in interacting with other students.

In the absence of cultural, symbolic, and social capital, students could use the APIs to agentially reflect on the ways they could more effectively situate themselves, regardless of restricted access to physical resources, certain practices, specific knowledge, and social advantages. The SNIs, the Facebook weblogs, and the APIs all worked to increase social capital, that is, relationships that confer practical advantage,

through increasing pathways to mentorship and psychosocial support from peers, community, and family. One student recognized the necessity of social capital in the university space, very early on, in the study:

I think for most of us on Facebook we all agree that, I remember having this one conversation Somebody couldn't get something done and . . . she was afraid of someone else in the system. And we all said that's a problem, because it doesn't matter which campus you're on. You get further if you know who are the right people to speak to. (BF_31_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2014)

It is the unequal allocation of all these forms of capital that continues to perpetuate inequality. Consequently, building social and cultural capital and exposing symbolic capital were crucial to attain emancipation and important too for the exercising of agency in this study. The theory of agency and emancipation authenticates the possibility of agency in spite of oppressive systems and ongoing inequalities. Agency works alongside those restrictions and obstacles to offer opportunities for young people to identify their struggles, change their situations, fight against oppressive structures, and in the end, succeed. Finally, the documentary allowed for us to put a name, face, and voice to the narratives of students whose experiences, in many ways, reflect learnings around these different forms of capital.

Study Limitations

Lynch (2000) cautions that emancipation is not something that can be conferred on one group (student participants) by another (researchers and academics). That even with emancipatory intent, there are still issues of unequal power relations between the researcher and research subject. In the end, it is still the researchers who collate the report sharing methodological insights and it is also us who edit the film, selecting what will be included and what we will exclude.

We must continue to grapple with how we can better offer an exchange with participants that is truly agential and emancipatory. It is not enough that the participants we come into contact with engage in reflexivity and share their stories but that they must be granted democratic and equal control over definitions and interpretations of their lifeworld through their ongoing involvement in the research process (Lynch, 2000). More significantly, that involvement in the research benefits them and leads them to make meaningful and positive life changes.

Several challenges Lynch identifies as arising in emancipatory research include the high cost and funders disinterest in bearing the weight of these expenses. Another challenge is that there continues to be very little research training available on emancipatory methodologies. We hope that our study demonstrates that emancipatory methodologies need not be intimidating or excessively costly to funders and that we have started to craft a framework for more collaborate exchange between

researchers and participants in the research process, at least for the global South.

Finally, Lynch (2000) importantly reminds us “one cannot escape the reality of power relations even within the language of emancipation” (p. 85). As researchers dedicated to emancipatory participant-centered interventionist methodologies, we must constantly question power dynamics, inequalities, and representation in our own research processes. Where we can further accommodate the notion of the participants’ ongoing involvement in the research is in the dissemination of our research products. For instance, as we embark on dissemination activities for this study, it is imperative that we call upon our participants, in some capacity to be involved in the activities.

Future Research

If we want to decolonize research methods, we need to be sensitive to the fact that our emancipatory methods will not necessarily mirror conventional methods. It is becoming increasingly accepted that humanities-based and qualitative methods, “cut the imaginary umbilical cord” from the scientific foundation that birthed them and from which they grew (Cooper & Hughes, 2015, p. 31). There is legitimacy in arts-based inquiry like *Ready or Not!* The process we went through producing the documentary film resembles the process of any social science-based qualitative project in that we did interviewing, participant observation, document analysis, and so on. Even the preproduction phase was about studying the subject, culture, issues, and events that would be central to the film.

Film and storytelling through film enables researchers to think beyond traditional methods when representing sensitive life experiences and narratives. There is tremendous responsibility in researching human experiences and behavior, especially when those experiences are so embedded with trauma, pain, suffering, and/or even survival, as is often the case in South Africa. The process of engaging in the narratives of others empowers us to locate our own distinctive place in the world (Bruner, 1986), because watching and listening are actions (Cooper & Hughes, 2015) and aesthetic experiences like watching a film require the “conscious participation” of individuals (Greene, 1995, p. 125). Through engaging in visual art forms, as both producers and end users, we participate in multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world in ways that allow us to see the world from a different position (Cooper & Hughes, 2015; Eisner, 2002).

Moreover, it is what we *do* after we hear a story, see a video clip, listen to an experience, witness a testimony that is essential, and we think that is where the real work of *Ready or Not!* will be appreciated. After seeing this film, what will students learn, what will they change in their behavior or what will they do differently or better at university? After hearing other students’ experiences of navigating university, academic pursuits, racial microaggressions, university admissions, transformation, and socializing at university—what will they *do*? It is up to the film as an audiovisual and engaging stimulus to open up discussion about the core themes of the study, provide firsthand

experience/commentary and offer advice for incoming students in a way that a research report cannot do as effectively for young people. For us, the usefulness of arts-based research, the usefulness of *Ready or Not!*, will depend entirely on the potential of the film to prompt reflection in students, in learners, in parents, in teachers, in lecturers, government departments, policy makers, university administrators, and faith-based institutions about alternative ways of being and operating that yield different results. It is not possible to provide final answers to enormously complex and fluid educational issues but what the documentary has the potential to do is to raise questions about elements of problematic educational policy and practice but also revel in the successes (Barone, 2003) of those who beat the odds.

So key too, in arts-based emancipatory methodologies, is a product that is not inanimate; it must be interacted with, poked and prodded in ways that add another layer to the research. As we embark on a comprehensive dissemination process for this documentary film to various stakeholders in 2018–2019, we are looking to enhance the efficacy of the film through the development of supportive facilitation material for young people and those whom they come into contact with at higher education institutions. The analysis is not over now that the film has been finalized. There is still much life after it. This is a critical site of future research and will contribute to further interventionist and emancipatory research methods.

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Notes

1. The eight universities involved in the study were: University of Cape Town, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of Johannesburg, North-West University, University of Limpopo,

University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban University of Technology, and the University of Fort Hare.

2. We use the terms Black, "Colored," Indian, and White as the formal population group categories used for analysis in South Africa.
3. The rapid ethnography was a useful method to identify relevant issues relating to students' university experience. The rapid ethnography asked researchers to observe first-year students in their lecture theaters, observe campus grounds, demographic constitution of students on campus, geographic information, campus climate, recreation, health, and social support services available on campus.

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