

An exercise in thinking critically about participatory research



Melanie Nind, University of Southampton

I teach our doctoral students in education about participatory and emancipatory research in an optional afternoon workshop. I want to inspire them to think in new ways about how we might conduct research without zealously advocating an ideology. The challenge I find is wanting to convey so much about the topic *and* foster critical thinking about it in the little time we have together such that they can apply what they learn. My solution has been a mix of exposition and class discussion with an exercise sandwiched in the middle. This exercise has proved to be fun, motivating and thought-provoking in equal measure. As the exercise facilitates discussion and understanding of what is important about participatory research data generation methods, I share it here with other methods teachers. For context, I introduce the students first to the changing dynamics and discourses of participatory, emancipatory and inclusive research and to their functions to include, disrupt and create culture change. We only look at methods after considering the features of the wider social turn toward democratising research.

The exercise itself is done in small groups using sticky notes and the diamond 9 method (Clark, 2012). I ask the students to write one research method for generating data on each of their nine sticky notes and then to arrange them in diamond 9 configuration (see figure) according to which is the most and least participatory. As it can be time consuming to generate their nine methods to work with, I give them some starter suggestions: structured interviews, focus groups, photovoice. These provide deliberate contrasts and serve a useful purpose as talking points in the plenary. The process of positioning (and re-positioning) the methods in the hierarchy requires the students to engage with core concepts in participatory research about control and voice and choice. They are stimulated to consider the researcher-researched power dynamic, reflect on how particular methods can be made more or less participatory (such as unstructured rather than structured interviews), and some even discuss whether it is the method or its users and purposes that make research participatory. When they have completed the task (or the allotted time is up), I invite them to look at each other's work and to reflect and comment on the exercise.

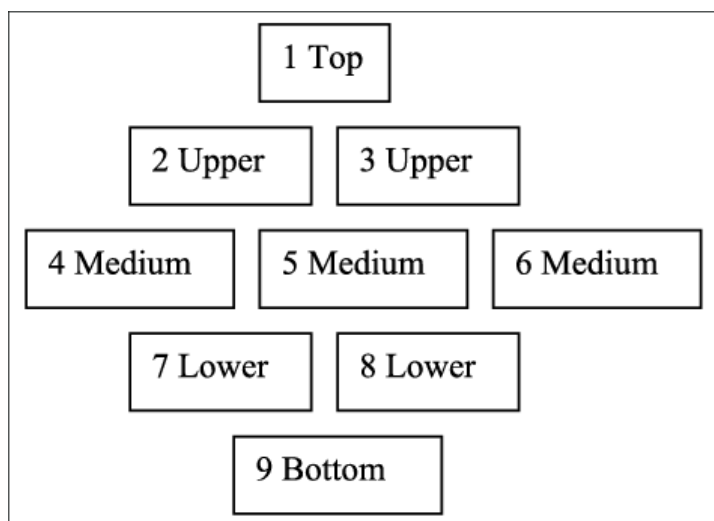


Figure 1: The diamond 9 configuration

In the plenary I also share some of the things I observed and dialogue that I jotted down as they worked. This is useful as inevitably some groups take longer to reach consensus and so have an unfinished product but rich learning points in their dialogue that I can illuminate. The nuances of talk such as, 'how is photovoice different from photo elicitation?' and 'it depends on who the interviewer is - it being a peer could change everything' are helpful for highlighting the power dynamics surrounding, as well as within, the methods. Further between group dialogue ensues. Rarely do groups include diamond 9 as one of their methods so a finale question is where they would place this method in their diamond. I tell them about previous groups who have sabotaged the exercise by refusing to make a diamond shape; one group put all the methods in a line to make their point. These uses, I say, show that the method is well-suited to participatory research because the participants can grab hold of it and take it in a new direction to communicate their perspectives. The lightbulb is truly lit as these students really appreciate how, for methods to be participatory, they need to flex and yield to participant power.

References

Clark, J. (2012). Using diamond ranking as visual cues to engage young people in the research process. *Qualitative Research Journal* 12(2): 222–237.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/14439881211248365>