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Participatory photography as a complimentary research tool with vulnerable groups

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Introduction

This paper is reflecting on the contribution of participatory photography as a complementary research tool with vulnerable groups. The aim of the main research project was to gain understanding of family resilience under difficult circumstances. Since we had access to refugees who attended English language courses in Pretoria, South Africa, we were provided with an ideal opportunity for deepening an understanding of the resilience of families during times of upheaval and uncertainty. However, the methodological challenges of this project should not be underestimated. The divisions between the researchers of the study, four middle class South African academics, and the research participants, refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi, are stark – material inequalities, racial differences, different nationalities, divisions in terms of citizenship status and no common language are the most salient divisions. These differences complicated the power dynamics between the researchers and the research participants (and also the research interpreters) that could easily lead to misunderstandings which in turn may lead to misrepresentations of the research participants by the researchers. Certain researchers may even suggest that in such situations where the life worlds of research participants and the researchers are so vastly different, the topics are best left to researchers who are closer to the participants ("insiders"). I have argued against such a singular view before by showing how the outsider can yield different results and even access information that may be hidden from an insider (Rabe 2003). Whereas the fluidity of being considered an "insider" or "outsider" should always be kept in mind, I want to further the view that the insight gained by outsiders can add value to research topics, sometimes in unexpected ways. In reflecting on this research process, the contribution of visual images in conjunction with the analysis of other qualitative research methods is explored. The role of the translators and ethical guidelines are further specific avenues of consideration in this research journey.

Participatory photography

Using visual images in qualitative research has become extremely popular in the last few decades, not least because of the economic availability and used-friendliness of technological devices (PINK 2006, 19). GRADY (2004, 19) states that the dominance of the visual media in present-day society makes it almost impossible for social scientists to ignore it. The author encourages the use of visual images in qualitative research since "the image is a unique form of data that stores complex layered meanings in a format that is immediately retrievable". Visual images can thus be created by social scientists but existing

images can also be used. When analysing existing visual images of migrants, it transpires that they are often portrayed as either victims or threats (GIILIGAN & MARLEY, 2010, par.2). In trying to draw attention to the plight of immigrants, specifically African immigrants to Europe, journalism often use visual images that will cause an alarming reaction by viewers or at least draw attention to the contrasts between affluent Europeans and poor immigrants. Although such images broaden the stereotype of "immigrants as a threat", these visual images still portray them as in need of help and are not necessarily representative of immigrant experiences. Images of immigrants as victims are limiting and stereotypical as none of the agency of immigrants are portrayed (GILLIGAN & MARLEY, 2010, par.7&8). Advocacy groups on the other hand may want to promote positive images of immigrants, immigrant artists in particular are examples of such positive images in the UK, but where negative stereotypes at least reflects certain realities, positive images may play down the difficult circumstances immigrants have to face (GILLIGAN & MARLEY, 2010, par. 13).

One of the attempts to overcome these stereotypical images of immigrants and focus on the less sensational and mundane aspects of immigrants' lives, is by makings use of participatory photography "to 'give voice' to marginalised, less powerful people" (LUTTRELL & CHALFEN 2010:198). In participatory photography the research participant becomes the photographer and all images are created by the research participants, often with the use of disposable cameras. The researcher will provide guidelines to the participant on what types of images are sought. Once the photographs are developed, the researcher and the participant usually have a discussion on the images and their meaning but other methods such as written diary keeping by the participant may also be followed. The result of this methodology is that more than one interpretation (that of the researcher and the participant) is already established during the data gathering phase.

Participatory photography has been used in focusing on a number of marginalised groups where people make use of photographs that are focusing on specific aspects of their lives. KIHATO (2009), for example, asked the research participants in her project, who were all immigrants to Johannesburg, to take photographs of aspects of their lives to broaden the understanding of their lives. Carefully selected photographs are presented by the research participants in which they try to convey specific presentations of their lives that are often deliberately far removed from stereotypical images of migrants. Kihato gave a sophisticated account of these photographic images. In contrast to KIHATO's study, PRINS (2010, 1-2) argues that the process of photography and its pitfalls are given scant attention

in many projects. In discussing the methodology section next, the pitfalls and the low response rate in this particular research project is given attention.

Methodology

The three methodological legs of this qualitative study include three group interviews, ten in-depth interviews and a participatory photography project. The latter leg will be discussed in more detail by focusing on selected photographs in relation to data from the individual interviews and the research process as a whole in order to make sense of participatory photography as an additional research method.

An overarching research project (funding was provided by the South African National Research Foundation) with two researchers from the University of South Africa (UNISA) and two from the University of Johannesburg (UJ), was centred on deepening an understanding of the resilience and family well being in various sectors of society. The Pretoria central areas (Pretoria inner-city, Sunnyside and Arcadia) were selected for this project since the department of Social Work from UNISA established a centre in central Pretoria (Bright Site Centre) where various social services are offered to clients from the area. More information on the inhabitants of the Pretoria central areas was welcomed by the coordinator of the centre. One of the services offered by the centre is an English language course for refugees free of charge. Since we had direct access to this group through the language course presenter and the number of foreigners in the Pretoria central areas is substantial, we decided to include these particular residents in the bigger project on family resilience and wellbeing.

The first leg of the refugee research project consisted of group interviews. With the help of the main presenter of the language courses, three group interviews were arranged towards the end of 2009 at the Bright Site Centre where some of the refugees attended the free English language courses. The aim of these interviews were to map out the general obstacles the research participants experienced in coming to South Africa and form a tentative picture of their family ties. We had three translators for the three different group interviews that took place simultaneously, the first translator being the presenter of the language courses and the other two were Master's students in an interdisciplinary degree in the Social Sciences at UNISA.

Two of the groups were homogeneous in terms of gender and country of origin and valuable information into family life could be obtained (see SMIT and RUGUNANAN 2010). However, the more heterogeneous of the three groups presented a myriad of problems. Additional language difficulties arose of which the most extreme example is the translator not understanding the language of one of the participants and another participant (the only one in the entire group who also understood this particular participant's language) had to translate a question for a second time to a third language. All the people who arrived late were also accommodated in this group which created disturbances in the flow of the group discussion. Many of the female participants had young children with them who either ate continuously from the refreshments provided or were generally restless which meant that their mothers were not fully involved in the discussions. The group members differed in their levels of education and certain members were well spoken and verbally domineering which made it difficult to give an opportunity to all participants to make a contribution to the discussion.

Apart from the above difficulties, it was clear from this first encounter with the research participants that there was a general mistrust of people asking questions to refugees. This is not surprising if the xenophobic attacks on foreigners that swept through South Africa in 2008 are taken into account (NYAR 2011). In addition, it became clear that refugees have been asked many questions by officials of different nationalities and representatives of various organisations before. Some people have approached them with promises of help in their journeys as refugees starting from the time they fled their countries of origin but such inquisitive encounters either had negative consequences or had little effect on improving their quality of life. A frequent question amongst refugees is thus, why should we spend time answering questions or more bluntly, "what do I get out of this research?" The participants were not willing to believe in any promises but since we did not make any promises, they could almost not believe that we expected them to cooperate in our research if we did not give them something in return. Prior to the start of the group interviews a lot of time was spent on explaining the aim of our research and the conditions under which the research would take place (standard procedures of anonymity, using pseudonyms and voluntary participation were highlighted) and that we are not providing any financial compensation to them (this was also explained to them beforehand by the language instructor who organised the discussions) but they clearly still hoped for more immediate benefits from the interviews. Providing refreshments and transport money to the research location did not impress them and they wanted something tangible in return. For them, we represented wealth since we were South Africans with material means in their view. We were even offered domestic cleaning

services by certain women. Despite having diverse and vast experiences of fieldwork, such direct approaches for financial help by research participants were unusual for us.

Since the status of being an "outsider" or "insider" is fluid, spending time with research participants in order to build a relationship of trust is considered the avenue to follow in overcoming mistrust but a stumbling block is that research participants may not want researchers to gain intimate knowledge about their lives (for whatever reason) and withdrew from research projects. In addition, ethical protocols that guide our research that prevent us from paying research participants, not least because it lead to a situation where participants feel they have to tell you what they think you want to hear, are considered a support structure in research settings but it seemed to arouse, rather that allay, fear and suspicion (see also LUTTRELL & CHALFEN 2010: 198). For example, research participants are not keen to sign informed consent letters which seems to contradict assurances of anonymity.

After reflecting on our experiences of not being trusted during the group interviews, we decided that the next step would be to construct an interview questionnaire containing open and close ended questions. The translator, who organised the group interviews as well, would have individual interviews with ten selected people (we made use of purposive sampling by giving specific guidelines to the translator on the selection of the research participants). At this stage of the research we thus removed the expectations on the side of the participants by removing the direct presence of the researchers from the research situation. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with six women from the DRC and four from Burundi. These interviews were recorded and transcribed by the translator who then handed the auditory and written versions of the interviews to us (I had a discussion with our translator after listening and reading the first interview). All ten women had children and their ages varied from 22 to 44 years.

Although baseline information and certain in-depth information were contained in the transcriptions of the individual interviews, we still lacked "thick" data and certain basic information. For example, it was still unclear how all the women managed to survive financially and what resources are available to them. In other words, the participants stressed their difficulties but not their survival strategies during the individual interviews. Since we were particularly interested in resilience, another route was sought to address these omissions, and participatory photography was embarked upon as a complementary qualitative method. In a photographic project the difficulties we experience with language barriers

would be overcome since we would have images that would help us to understand how the refugee women survived and how their family relations form part of their everyday lives. As PINK (2001, 3) suggested "the methods should serve the aims of the research" and representing the material reality in collaboration with the research participant and the translators was aimed at crossing the mentioned divisions (LUTTRELL and CHALFEN 2010, 197). Similar to PRINS (2010, 6), I believed that this approach would invite more active participation from our participants, give them the opportunity for self-expression and help us to gain greater insight into our research questions. However, again similar to the experiences of PRINS, I had not foreseen the problems encountered in this part of the project.

To argue that photographic images may overcome language barriers may seem naive since visual images also have cultural codes of interpretation that are exacerbated by the other divisions between the researchers and participants mentioned above. However, the participatory photography project created new avenues of face-to-face interaction. There is thus a latent function of participatory photography in providing additional opportunities to interact with the participant as well as translators who may also be sources of additional information.

We thus asked our translator to locate the women he interviewed and invite them to an information session. The same translator would help to provide the link between the interviews and the photographic leg of the research. Seven women were present in the information interview and a new translator was summarily introduced by our original translator after which he disappeared. This lack of continuity of translators became a further stumbling block since the research participants required far more explanations on the research process where the faces they encountered kept on changing.

During the information session, each of the women was provided with a disposable camera with an information letter and guidelines on the type of photographs and the purpose of such photographs. The information letter and the instruction were available in English and French (the translation was done by a professional translator) and everybody had information before them that they could understand (all of the research participants were literate). With the help of the "new" translator I explained every aspect of the new leg of the research and that they may withdraw from the project at any time. I explained how the camera worked and everybody took at least one photograph to ensure that they understood the mechanics of the camera clearly. In addition, we discussed strategies for taking photographs so that the identity of the individuals could stay hidden or examples of artefacts that could be symbolic of

elements in their lives. It was agreed that I would meet them again after two weeks, get the cameras from them after which the photographs would be developed and become their property. I made sure that they understood that we had electronic copies of the photographs but they would keep the print-offs.

Again, through this entire discussion two women in particular were very vocal in establishing what they would "get out of the project". Since my explanation of understanding the life worlds of refugees better so that there may come some "general benefit in future" satisfied many of the participants but two of them kept on questioning the reason for the research. I explained again that they would actually not receive any direct benefit from the project except for the photographic prints and that they should see this as an opportunity to help me. This particular expression of needing help from others seemed to strike a chord with many of the participants and they agreed to help me, making them the benefactors instead of the beneficiaries. After this minor breakthrough in my view, one of the two vocal women in particular asked the translator to assure me that she did not intend to be rude towards me and that she genuinely would like to help me. After making sure that the woman who departed earlier would not receive any benefit that they would not (since they saw me writing down her mobile phone number – which I did because she was to move to another city soon), everybody appeared satisfied.

I handed out two additional cameras later on to two women who could not attend the original meeting. Of the nine cameras distributed, four people returned cameras to me from which photographs were developed. Unfortunately one of these four people could not be located again and the photograph interview never took place. Photographs from the remaining three are discussed below. Of the remaining five cameras, one person never returned the camera despite numerous promises, two people moved to Johannesburg during this time and we could not set up a time to meet them despite a few attempts through mobile phone contact, one person's camera contained only one photograph since she most probably did not use the camera correctly after her practice shot and the last camera contained photographs of people who attended the language courses and nothing else.

Although my first reaction was to abandon the entire research project due to the low response rate, I decided to rather use the few images and additional information that I acquired and to reflect on the entire research process.

The visual images

It was explained to the research participants that the aim of this leg of the research was to help us understand their world by using images and we provided key themes to focus their attention such as "important people who help you cope", "making a living in South Africa", "what gives you strength" and "what makes your life difficult". Certain information gained from the in-depth interviews was confirmed by the photographs and the photograph interviews whilst other information was given a new perspective.

Children

One of the most enduring themes from the interviews was the importance of children, it was clear that of all the family bonds, the mother-child(ren) bond was the strongest and the relationship that was salient in the thoughts of the research participants. Caring for them, their material and educational needs and their future prospects were often the aspects that kept the mothers continuing with their daily struggle and provided as an example for "what gives you hope". The photographs and discussions with Danielle (photograph 1) and Nina (photograph 2) confirmed this view:

Photograph 1: Children in school uniform

Photograph 2: Uniform symbolising education

In almost all of the cases the children and their education was seen as an example of hope for the future. Struggling to get children enrolled in a school is a common theme which also revealed the fact that many refugees are not aware of their rights as registered refugees. The school uniform, which is a standard requirement for attending a school in South Africa, is symbolic for their commitment to educating their children and their hope that a better future is possible for their children.

Survival

A number of the research participants explained during the personal interviews that they were involved in small scale trading for financial survival and during the group interviews certain men indicated that they were car guards (a regular practice in South Africa where an informal offer is made to a motorist to look after his/her whilst they are parked in public areas in exchange for a small amount of money). Yet, it was impossible to understand how some research participants made a living, see for example Nina's response to how she survives:

> I had some business placed on the street and some people came and took all away requesting me to go back home … I know it is hard [to realise dreams] but I will seek assistance from those who can help me get there.

Nina was thus a victim of xenophobia and it was difficult to understand how the family survived financially by these vague responses. Yet the pictures she provided made things clearer.

Photograph 3: Making a living in South Africa
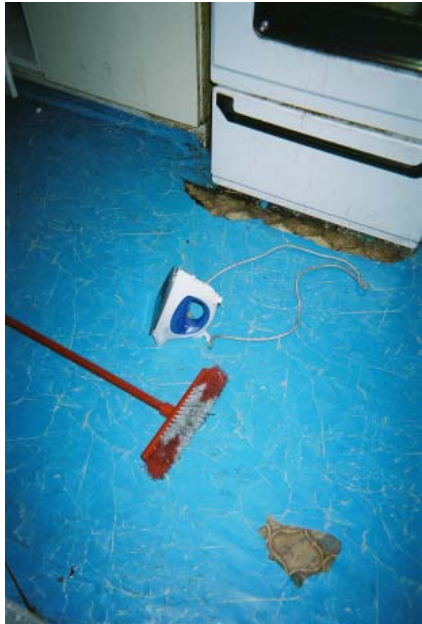
Since Nina's husband is also out of work, she kept the family together by doing housework and ironing for other refugees who were more fortunate than her. This explanation was only provided when discussing the photographs and the link between these activities and the church she attended also came to the fore for the first time. She found many of her clients through the church she has been attending and she also does some cleaning in the church building. One of the people to whom she turns if there is no other help, is a church leader, originally from the DRC, pictured below:

Photograph 4: Preacher standing at entrance of church

The minister of the church, dressed in clothes of good quality and standing next to a new well kept car, is Nina's last call for help when she needs money and cannot find it anywhere else. Although she does earn a little money through domestic work which gives her access to certain material resources, this money is not enough to sustain her and her three children continuously as the jobs are mostly intermittent. Although Nina mentioned the church in the in-depth interview, the importance of the church as a source of practical support was never mentioned. Through the interview based on the photographs this element in the lives of the refugees came strongly to the fore.

Certain photographs and the discussion thereof by the research participant gave a broader understanding of the relationship with children and of how mothers view this relationship. Compare the views of the following photograph by the mother and me:

Photograph 5: Child sleeping

The research participants were asked to create photographs based on seven broad themes and two of these themes were: "What makes you happy?/What gives you strength?" and "What makes you sad?/What makes your life difficult?" Once the photographs from Nina's camera was developed I scanned through them and was convinced that this particular photograph is an example of something that make her happy since her son (in my view) is peacefully asleep in an apparent safe environment. However, Nina immediately pointed to this photograph as the one that depicts the things that make her unhappy. When Nina took the photograph she saw poverty and the miserable conditions under which her children have to live. One of the curtains (of which a piece of the hem is visible on left hand side of the photograph) divides her family's living space from that of the other tenants of the apartment (it is common for apartments to be sublet to other tenants which places enormous pressure on the infrastructure, especially the sewerage system of apartment blocks). The dissatisfaction with the physical conditions of their living space underlined her statements in the individual interview about their home in their country of origin where the children were used to having their own bedrooms and furniture.

Different interpretations of the same images at the same time has been extensively commented on (BALL & GILLIGAN 2010, par 9) but the above differences in perception also point to some of the most

enduring criticisms of visual images namely the ambiguity and selectivity of visual material. The counterargument that written word and texts can also be ambiguous and that there are ways in which to remove the ambiguity (KNOWLES & SWEETMAN 2004, 13) is of importance here, the photographs are embedded within a certain context and participatory photography without explanatory interviews with the research participants could easily be misleading.

Did you lie to us?

It is thus clear that photographs without discussions could lead to uninformed conclusions and therefore the photographic interviews are indispensable. However, it was difficult to convince Michelle, one of the vocal members during the distribution of the cameras referred to above, that the interview was needed. The photographs Michelle took had nothing to do with the themes given to her and mostly included shots of her friends (also refugees) and family at a local friendly football game. On receiving the photographs she looked at them with interest and wanted to put them away in her handbag. On this occasion the translator was late and it was only with great difficulty that I managed any discussion related to the photographs with one of her friends acting as a translator.

In *Photograph 6*, which is also taken at the mentioned soccer match, some indications of the lifestyle of the people attending the match emerge. A number of indicators of wealth is visible – the cars, the shoes lying next to the bag, the bag itself and the clothes, especially that of the pictured woman, being worn. The area where the shot is taken has well kept grass and infrastructure for sporting events which implies that the players and their supporters, of whom many, if not all, are refugees, have access to South African facilities. The man sitting on the ground drinking from a can, with two other empty cans beneath his legs, is also pictured in a different photograph taken by Michelle where he appears intoxicated. It is clear from the series of photographs taken by Michelle that she has a vast network of friends who have some material means.

Photograph 6: At a soccer match

In *Photograph 7* a television set on a stand is the focal point in a room where Michelle lives that is sectioned off by a curtain on the left which again indicates access to material resources.

Photograph 7: Television set in apartment (Michelle's photograph)

At the time of the interview, Michelle was a thirty year old widow with five children whose ages ranged from four to sixteen years. In the script of the research interview the difficulties in her life were highlighted and she specifically mentioned that her youngest child wakes up in the middle of the night:

>They [children] have no clothes, enough food or other means. They always question me. They sometimes say that one day they may become like those kids they show on TV with small bodies and big stomach. Sometime the one who is four years will wake me up for food, yet there is nothing in the house, so it very disturbing.

This same child that Michelle is referring to in the quote is pictured here in *Photograph 8.*

Photograph 8: Pre-school boy

This particular quote was remembered by all the researchers as an example of the refugees' difficulties. However, after meeting Michelle twice an entirely different view of her emerged than the one portrayed in the transcript of the interview. Michelle is a tall woman (she smiled and agreed with me that her youngest child is also very tall for his age) wearing lots of make-up. She is outspoken, even verbally aggressive, and she asked me directly (through a translator and in front of another friend of her – she refused to wait for my translator) to give her money so that she can buy airtime for her mobile phone (which I flatly refused in accordance with the ethical guidelines of my institution and as was stipulated in the consent letter she signed when agreeing to partake in this research).

It is difficult to reconcile these photographs with a child being hungry at night especially since she had no qualms to try and get money out of me in front of her friends. However, I do not want to suggest that Michelle lied when she said her son is hungry at times during the night, but it appears rather that there are times in which she has access to material means (a mobile phone, good clothes that I saw her in on two occasions, cosmetics) but that this access is not constant and that there other times at which she struggles financially. Although Michelle has access to various people with more money than herself, the idea that she is a kind of "gold digger" is also not accurate in my view. In her interview she stated that a wealthy man (no more detail can be given to protect her identity) asked her to marry him but she refused as he was not willing to take her children into his household as his own. Michelle can best be understood as a woman who is doing everything in her power to ensure that she and her children live the most comfortable lives possible. After spending time with her it is still unclear where her income originates from which may imply that she either does not trust me enough to give the answer – she may for example be involved in illegal activities although that is pure speculation – or that she is also unsure of her sources of income since they are diverse, dependent on the goodwill of others and sporadic.

In summary, due to the lack of trust and various practical hindrances, very few images were obtained from the latter part of this project. More images may have been obtained if the uncertainties in the women's lives were realised earlier on (especially the regular movement between cities or apartments due to financial difficulties and other practical reasons) but the lack of trust in us as researchers most probably still played a decisive role. "Not remembering to bring a camera" may be a polite way of indicating that "I do not want to take part in your research anymore because I do not trust you". However, the images we did obtain show that participatory photography has the potential to confirm, explain and deepen an understanding of material obtained from research interviews. In addition, the latent function of this photographic project was the additional time spent with participants and transaltors.

Translators

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main issues that hindered communication between the researchers and the research participants in this project was the absence of a shared language and hence translators were indispensable. In many research projects translators are regarded as a "mechanical and potentially problematic part of the process" (BERMAN & TYYSKÄ 2011:180) but they can also be regarded as an advantageous part of the process since they provide additional avenues of

information on the research question. In this study the translators were also the access point to the participants and one translator acted as fieldworker during the individual interview stage of the research and therefore their roles call for "methodological reflexivity" (TEMPLE & EDWARDS 2002:5).

All the translators that became involved in this study had legal refugee status in South Africa and all of them were studying and/or working at UNISA. As explained, it transpired during the first leg of the research that the expectations from the research participants included instrumental help from us as researchers. Since, in the second stage, we wanted the interviews to centre on the specific themes of our research without the complex power relationships between the participants and us as researchers. The personality and characteristics of our translator during the first two stages was indeed both enabling and hindering the research. He was an undergraduate student in social sciences and involved in the teaching of the free English classes to the refugees. Being a refugee himself with good language and interpersonal skills, he had access to a wide range of refugees. He understood the problems the refugees experienced since he experienced them as well. His input was invaluable since he was an insider to the research community. He was inventive with good technological skills which were important since he had to make backup copies from the auditory equipment and so forth. Moreover, he was likeable, helpful and someone who "got things done".

However, he was very busy and he seldom had enough time or the inclination to sit down and discuss methodological issues. He also had no training as a social researcher and he was more of an organiser than a listener which meant that discussions with him did not change his style of interviewing much. Furthermore, the translator did not follow all instructions closely and although sections of the interviews were invaluable (see SMIT and RUGUNANAN 2010), various sections were superficial or even incorrectly reported as it transpired when certain information was later cross-checked. For example, we asked him to interview five men and five women but he interviewed nine women and one man (in light of this we decided to replace the interview with the man with an interview with another woman whom I interviewed with a different translator).

In order to gain more in-depth data, I thus asked our initial translator to find us a different translator and I explained to him that we specifically needed a woman. Since some of the interviewed women lived through traumatic events (for example being raped, losing a child through a forced miscarriage and being a victim of domestic violence) it was thought they would feel more comfortable discussing certain

aspects with a woman. Both the Master's students who helped us with the group interviews were male, lived in different towns and were busy with the fieldwork of their own research. The translator who helped me during the discussion with the women on the photographic research, was far more gentle but also male. But it was in fact through him that our second important translator came to the fore. She was young and I experienced her as unthreatening which seemed ideal at that point since it became clear that our first translator tended to take the lead in interviews without giving enough time for reflection by the participants. Moreover, she could speak English better than all the previous translators. She also studied at UNISA (although not in social sciences) and was a dedicated student.

Then it transpired that our "ideal translator" could not be relied on since she would miss appointments or arrive very late. Eventually it became clear to me that the young child she had with her at times was mentally handicapped. The child had no fear of heights and since we were on the fourth floor of a building, not seeing the child could send the translator into panic. At this point I made an important realisation – the lives of our translators with whom I had informal discussions and the lives of our research participants were very different. All the translators had far better prospects for their immediate future and the main reason for that was their links to specific family members and how these family members provided both support and demanded help from them. Although not spelled out in this way within the family, the female translator was expected to look after her niece during most of the day in exchange for having a place to live and some financial contributions to her studies. In contrast to the translator, our research participants had no such safety net in terms of extended families, in fact many of them answered that they felt obligated to give financial help to their family members in the home countries, but they could not even support themselves properly. Yet the expectations back home were that they would be able to help family members now that they were living in a comparatively rich country such as South Africa. All our translators were able to study in the hope that they could secure better income for themselves and their families and they had family members who were in a position to help them.

The translators' own study, family and work commitments were thus at times a stumbling block in the progress of the research but at the same time it provided insight in living as a refugee in South Africa. By spending time with the translators, a second picture of being a refugee thus emerged in this research which was very different from those of the research participants.

Conclusion

All three of the qualitative research methods used in this project carried obstacles that hindered the development of shared meaning between the research participants and the researchers. Despite these obstacles the general guidelines of an open approach to research participants did bear some fruit. From the photograph project major themes from the in-depth interviews were highlighted and strengthened. In difficult times the mother-child bond is particularly resilient in the family relations. The mothers build their lives around their children by doing their utmost to secure their material wellbeing. A good education for their children represents hope for the future which is a second theme that is underlined by the photographic presentations. The apparent inconsistencies in the photographs and the research interviews on material wellbeing may point to the complexity of spending patterns of poor households amongst refugees. With a steady flow of income certain goods are purchased (such as televisions, household appliances and mobile phones) that can be used over a medium term. However, due to an insecure labour market that is coupled with xenophobia and no financial safety net, daily needs such as food and even shelter, easily become unfulfilled. Michelle used to work in a nail parlour and Nina was a trader but Michelle lost her job and Nina her stock and in both cases this rapidly led to situations where children's basic needs could not be met on a daily basis.

Furthermore, the importance of the translators in the qualitative research not only had an effect on how the research progressed, but also on who took part in the research. By considering the fact that all the translators were also refugees, it became clear that these mothers (research participants) who walk a tightrope between survival and absolute poverty represent a specific category of refugee. Refugees who managed to have stronger ties with extended family members in South Africa, had different experiences in that they had more sources of possible financial, practical and emotional support.

It has to be asked again why so few women actually picked up the camera, took the photographs and returned the camera and then had a follow-up interview with me. Apart from the possible unwillingness by certain participants alluded to above, the insecurities with which these women live are also of importance. Two of the women moved cities during this time. One of them had to change shelters as she feared that her former husband would attack her (as he had done before). In discussions with the women it became clear that they are often not settled and at least three of them have faced evictions by landlords before. By spending time with me discussing their lives, some have to give up time that they could have spent on survival economics such as selling. This may seem like a trivial reason not to

partake in research but if you have a landlord who wants to lock you out of your apartment and you have no safe place to store your stock, research interviews are not high on your priority list.

It also became clear that many of the women spend many hours on unnecessary activities. One woman was given incorrect information on registration of school children and was sent to a school far away to get her children registered. In a second example women travelled between cities because they were told by officials from the Department of Home Affairs that they may not change registration offices to renew refugee papers. It is possible that following such incorrect information could be the result of language barriers between refugees and South African officials, but it is also possible that they were deliberately given incorrect information. Whatever the case, it became clear that the women spent many hours on unnecessary errands and that they could have used that time more efficiently if they had the correct information on their rights from the start.

The focus on survival often leads some refugees in demanding a social exchange of resources that could be seen as a test for ethical guidelines in such situations. Yet, although no direct benefits were reaped by the individual research participants, the English language course project was strengthened through our research contact with local churches where the courses are now presented with support from a particular church. Presenting preliminary data from different research projects contributed to commitment and action from the Law Faculty at UNISA in providing relevant information on refugees to a wider audience (including the launching of a short course on the law and refugees).

Although the photograph project on its own can be regarded as a failure, it still enhanced certain aspects of the research and played a crucial role in furthering insight into the larger project. Despite deviations from the original research objectives, side issues concerning material insecurity and the experiences of being a refugee in South Africa came to the fore. Since we did the research from an outsider's perspective, the salient aspect of mistrust towards people asking questions was apparent. Furthermore, the desperation of a category of refugees who do not have extended family ties is apparent in the pleas for material support and enquiries about employment possibilities. It was also clear that neither the translators not the research participants could be considered as passive as could be seen in the way the translators' conducted the research and participants taking photographs that are not in line with the agreed upon themes. It is my hope that these experiences will form the basis of

future collaborative research on the life world of refugees which will underline the success of using participatory photography as a complementary research tool.

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