

Engaging with Marginalised Groups in Public Open Space Research: The Potential of Collaboration and Combined Methods

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses methodological dilemmas that were encountered, and strategies used to overcome them, in the Viewfinder project that was undertaken in 2004 in Sheffield, UK. The project investigated refugees' perceptions and experiences of urban public open space in the UK. Through partnership with a 12-week, accredited photography training course and visits to public open spaces, the research combined visual, experiential, participatory and longitudinal approaches. This paper discusses the success of these in relation to three aims: (1) generating a research situation of open communication; (2) collaborating with non-academic partners; and (3) creating mutual benefit. The research identifies methodological techniques that have potential for engaging marginalised groups in landscape and planning research and in consultation practice.

Keywords: Visual; participation; ethics; refugees; parks; Sheffield

Introduction

The Viewfinder project was undertaken in Sheffield, UK in 2004 and investigated immigrants' perceptions and experiences of urban public open space (POS) in the UK. The research aimed both to obtain empirical results and to explore the application of appropriate methodologies within an under-researched setting. More specifically, we hoped to create a research environment that would allow a marginalised sector of the population to engage openly and honestly with the research.

Several qualitative approaches were innovatively combined in this project, namely visual methods (through photography training), site visits, participation and longitudinal fieldwork. This paper lays out the rationale for this methodology and then critiques it in relation to three of the project's aims: (1) to generate a research situation of open communication; (2) to collaborate with non-academic partners; and (3) to create a mutually beneficial research situation. We illustrate how a flexible approach and a willingness to relinquish full control of the research situation enabled us to obtain rich and valid research material. The paper concludes by highlighting aspects of the methodological approach that have the potential to be developed as creative and successful ways of engaging with marginalised groups in landscape and planning research, and that have implications for consultation practice.

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Context: The Research Project

Research Aims and Importance

The potential of POS to provide benefits for urban residents has been well documented and is receiving increasing attention within government policy in the UK (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) Space, 2004; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2002). In the planning, design and management of urban green space, professionals aim to respond to the needs and desires of a diverse population. However, some sectors of society have received little attention within academic research, leading to a paucity of guidance within the professional sphere. The research project presented in this paper received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to investigate perceptions and experiences of urban POS by immigrant communities. (Later in the course of the project development this was refocused as specifically asylum seeker and refugee participants.)

One issue addressed by this research was 'non-use' of POS, especially with regard to aspects of cultural and ethnic identity (Burgess *et al.*, 1988; Gold, 1972; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995) and for newly arrived and comparatively isolated immigrants. We aimed to understand the potential for use of local green space to provide a restorative experience, and the need to contextualise the cultural understandings of both leisure and green space through participants' personal histories. Research in the area of landscape studies has demonstrated the importance and richness of childhood memories in the detail and character of landscape appreciation (Marcus, 1978; Ward Thompson, 2004). However, these studies mostly focus on situations where adult and childhood experiences are in similar locations. What meaning do these earlier experiences have in entirely different contexts: do they motivate engagement or does the difference exacerbate barriers to use? We were interested in the role of homeland memories in setting expectations and patterns of use, and how participants could recognise or renegotiate their idea of 'normal' open space within the culture shock of adjusting to a very different environment. This can crucially contribute to understandings of the environmental factor in the settlement process among new migrants. From a planning perspective, it gives an insight into the potential of POS to contribute to positive feelings of locality among 'new locals'.

Methodology and Its Rationale

In devising the methodology we worked at the boundary areas of traditional qualitative research methods, and adapted techniques from planning and design participatory practice. We would support Sandercock's (2003) assertion of the shared benefits of creative approaches in research, pedagogy and practice. Our personal backgrounds combine multiple roles: social science researcher, refugee support volunteer, teacher of design studios, community landscape architect. We wanted to explore the benefits of combining our expertise from these different arenas, and to question how, in turn, this could be presented for reflection and adaptation within academia and practice. This paper describes research-focused methodologies in which the primary aim was to produce empirical research findings. However, we hope that the techniques and approaches used to investigate these issues can critically inform the debate on meaningful consultation and research practice with culturally diverse groups (Beebeejaun, 2004; Thompson, 2003).

The project aimed to pilot an innovative methodology within a social science research context that would enable us to investigate the area of landscape perception and use, and to work sensitively with this particular participant group. The ability of people to

meaningfully represent their experiences of place can be diminished by rushed or simplistic methods in both research and planning practice. In particular, marginalised groups such as asylum seekers and refugees are seldom given the chance to voice their experiences of their environment due to multiple factors of mainstream disengagement: social, linguistic, spatial and educational (Bloch, 2000; ODPM, 2004; Olufemi & Reeves, 2004).

Key characteristics that defined our approach to the project were use of visual and on-site methods, and a commitment to informed participation and shared benefit with participants. In setting out these principles and practices, it is important to recognise both parallels with and differences from other forms of people–place enquiry. Below we briefly contextualise our project within associated fields, looking at common inspiration and identifying where objectives may differ.

Research and public consultation about the use and perception of open spaces, somewhat surprisingly, has predominantly been conducted in places and situations removed from these open spaces. The absence of experiential methods is notable. This encourages generalised accounts of user experience, possibly filtered (consciously or subconsciously) to comply with perceptions of what the researcher is interested in, rather than specific responses and reactions that capture details of micro-climate, noise, impressions of other park users, physical effort taken to move around the site and so on. Research that has been conducted on-site, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. Burgess, 1995), tends to employ observational surveys of users or short questionnaires, both of which lead to quantitative overviews, limited in their exploration of the issue (e.g. Hutchinson, 1987; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). Though in recent years there has been an increase in situated consultation events (see for example, Planning for Real and derivatives of this), these tend to elicit input from regular site users who are in the location or have visited for this purpose. Without significant adaptation, these research and consultative methods are unsuitable to use with a participant group such as this one, who are often ‘non-users’ of most POS in the city, limited in their English ability and distrustful of answering questions from strangers. By combining photography training and research with regular visits to urban POS, the Viewfinder project aimed to engage this marginalised group.

In collaboration with a community-based media training organisation, we developed a 12 week programme that would combine a free Open College Network accredited basic photography course with research into perceptions and experiences of urban green spaces. The course was intended to develop the visual communication skills of the participants, giving them a personal benefit from being involved as well as empowering them to contribute more fully to the research. The collaboration also created a situation rich in knowledge from the different partners that could be shared for the benefit of all. Providing a photography course also overcame traditional difficulties of recruiting research participants from immigrant communities (Bloch, 1999; Flowerdew & Martin, 1997) and provided a vehicle for participation in the research. Some participants saw it as a way of developing career prospects: “I don’t know how I’m gonna do but I’ll still continue my photography you know. Because I don’t want to do a hard job you know, I like photography” (Lamin, Liberia). The longitudinal nature of the project crucially gave time for skills and relationships to develop as well as for group visits to a number of different green spaces.

This context of combined methods and collaboration with photography training over a three month period enabled us to develop a participatory and inclusive ethos for Viewfinder. In the area of planning practice, participatory methods have grown in

influence and expanded in remit in the last few decades (New Economics Foundation, 1998). The role of the traditional planning meeting as a consultation model is recognised as only partial to any broad participatory strategy, and more innovative processes (often multi-modal and longitudinal) are gaining credence in this area. Texts such as Hester's (1990) *Community Design Primer* and Watts's (2000) *The Community Planning Handbook*, and the model of community consultation facilitators such as the Neighbourhood Initiative Foundation,¹ have encouraged planners to engage creatively with communities; to use playful approaches which facilitate collaborative effort and embrace contradictory and ambiguous responses. Visual and arts techniques, from taking of photos of a locality using disposable cameras to full-scale public performances, have been shown to contribute to the sharing of stories and revealing of underlying conflicts (Sarkissian, 2005; Sarkissian & Walsh, 1997). Sandercock (2003) argues for the importance of storytelling (verbal and non-verbal) as a means of revealing "questions of belonging and identity and difference", especially in the context of multicultural urban life (p. 22). In terms of stimulating stories and discussion, the Viewfinder project used a similar portfolio of facilitation techniques to encourage honest and reflective discussion, and participation in the project. However, use of this material in a research situation attempts a reflective investigation into questions and theories, whereas in a planning context it additionally informs an agenda for physical or organisational change.

Current participatory practice aims towards 'community capacity building' as a key outcome of a participatory planning process. This emphasises opportunities for people to learn through experience, and for this to contribute to a collective effort so that the community as a whole gains confidence in their skills and their ability to contribute to public decisions (Home Office, 2004). In this objective, the Viewfinder project would situate itself differently from planning practice. Involvement in the photography aspect of the project did lead to an accredited qualification. However, we were not working with a 'community' (whether described by locality or shared interest) and the skills learnt were seen as being purely of personal benefit. Though we aimed to address the power relations of traditional researcher-researched relationships, the project did not have a remit of empowerment on any scale other than mutual contribution and benefit from the research.

Another model of a project which draws on similar principles to Viewfinder is participatory action research. Collaborative and participatory approaches to research have been developed predominantly within medical/health and education settings as part of the broad 'family' of action research (Day *et al.*, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Action research combines research enquiry with an agenda for change within a specific situation, for example implementation of a policy or project. The researcher has an activist stance within the project context, crucially linking academic practice with real-world interaction (Reardon, 2003). This particular project essentially used participatory techniques to facilitate involvement in the research and share personal benefit, rather than to enact a wider transformation.

A participatory practice that has several characteristics in common with the Viewfinder project is PhotoVoice. This technique was developed from a background of anthropological academic research and photojournalism. Participants are given training in the use of cameras and document their own lives to produce a collective exhibition. This documentation can be used, usually in exhibition form, to influence a wider political or social concern. A primary purpose is to give a creative 'voice' to people otherwise marginalised from mainstream communication, and the technique has been used in the context of empowering social projects (PhotoVoice, 2003) and for action research purposes (McIntyre, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997). In her work on the meanings of place and

community among women in Belfast, McIntyre (2003) developed a photography project as a non-verbal form of storytelling. In this project the:

... camera provided resources enabling the women to tell 'visual stories' about themselves, thus creating opportunities for them to express themselves in their own images, words and reflections. In turn, these images became points of entry into seeing beneath surface issues, relationships, community events, and the extent to which place informs identity. (McIntyre, 2003, p. 48)

There are many similarities between PhotoVoice and the Viewfinder methodology in technique and intent, specifically in the desire to raise photographic skills in order to encourage expressive communication. However, most PhotoVoice projects appear to give greater priority to self-expression and reflection than was the case in Viewfinder, in which the focus was directed on experience of urban POS.

Within academic disciplines, visual methods are integral to many forms of social anthropology. This spans a wider range of practices from documentation, representational analysis and participatory techniques (Pink, 2001, 2004) and a visual anthropology network is increasingly influencing and integrating with 'mainstream' anthropology. Some of the techniques, such as photo elicitation, are common to other disciplines such as sociology and environmental psychology (Banks, 2001). Visual anthropology would assert a specifically people-centric approach, where visual methods are part of wider ethnographic projects (Pink, 2004, p. 2).

There is a tradition in work on landscape preference of using visual stimuli (Porteous, 1996). However, this tends to involve assessing participants' reactions to images rather than allowing them to be pro-active in producing or creating images and engaging with the medium (e.g. Nasar, 1984; Zube & Pitt, 1981). Participant photographs which then may be discussed or simply assessed by quantitative methods are a fairly common means of research enquiry (Dodman, 2003; Stewart *et al.*, 2004). The method of photo diaries has become more common in recent years, giving the participant the power over the subject-matter and, usually, the resultant topics of discussion (Banks, 2001). However, it is rare for participants to have the visual or photography skills to move beyond the expression of simple subject-matter to communicate their individual perspectives, and the diaries/ photographs provide only a snapshot of a particular day or week. We were concerned with equipping our group to visually communicate the complexities and emotional depth of their experiences.

In situating the Viewfinder project within these various disciplines and practice approaches, we reiterate that the participatory objectives of this research project are distinct from the broader social agenda of a practice planning project. Participatory and collaborative approaches used by academics seek to advance ethical debates about power relations in research contexts and the outputs and effects of research. It was important to us that we represented our values of social constructionism and non-essentialism (Kobayashi, 2001); of trying to respect and work with difference, and address the balance of power relations in traditional research (Skelton, 2001). The Viewfinder project was designed in this spirit, with the aim of promoting more integrated roles, breaking down traditional barriers of hierarchy and decision making, and making academic research less exclusive. We thereby recognise the value of different types of knowledge and experience (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Participants and Partners

The participant group comprised five men and one woman, all asylum seekers or refugees, who had been in the UK (and in Sheffield) for between two months and two and a half years. Their ages ranged from 17 to 45 and they came from Afghanistan, Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia and Zimbabwe. Some had refugee status (the right to remain permanently in the UK), others had humanitarian protection status (with permission to remain in the UK for a fixed period, usually up to three years) and one was in the process of appealing against a refusal of his asylum application. Two worked part-time, one undertook voluntary work and the others were unemployed. They were all studying English. With the exception of the youngest participant they were all separated from all members of their family. Only one participant had been educated at post-school level and two had never attended school in their home country. Their English abilities ranged from very basic to fluent.

As asylum seekers and recently arrived refugees, the participants were marginalised and living on the peripheries of UK society. This was clear from their conversations about their lives in the UK; the focus of their concerns being housing, money and their asylum applications; and their spheres of contact being almost entirely within the refugee sector (e.g. housing providers, case workers, other asylum seekers and refugees). This affected their perceptions of and responses to the sites we visited but also had methodological implications. For example, some were not in tune with mainstream UK culture of timekeeping and attendance. It also affected participation in the research because the participants clearly did not see themselves in positions of power or authority and therefore did not easily engage in the decision-making processes. In one interesting conversation, a refugee participant from Liberia described himself, without any prompting, as a “second-class citizen” because he lived with the possibility of being deported.

Our partner in facilitating the Viewfinder course was TIV,² a community training organisation based in Sheffield. It has been working for 10 years with minority ethnic communities in the city, providing training and services in video and film. It is based at a centre in a central location that houses several other voluntary, charity and non-governmental sector organisations supporting minority communities. During the period of our collaboration and since, it had no core funding and relied instead on specific project grants, commissions and volunteers. There were six staff, all in non-salaried positions, though we worked closely with two individuals. The staff and the organisation were rooted in African-Jamaican culture and had particularly strong links with this community in Sheffield. The working culture in which they operate was one of uncertainty, primarily in terms of funds, and they were continuously concerned with ensuring the continuation of their organisation. Within the context of the Viewfinder project they took responsibility for providing the photographic training and the related facilities and resources.

Methods Used

The Viewfinder group of asylum seekers and refugees met every Thursday afternoon for three months from May to July 2004 and an informal, supportive and friendly atmosphere quickly developed. In seven of the 12 sessions, plus two Saturdays, we visited a park or green space in Sheffield. A range of different types of parks were visited, located around the city, including formal gardens, semi-natural woodland, the city farm and festivals in parks. We travelled by minibus and the group members were given information about the site including a map and details about public transport. On site, the group explored and



Figure 1. Participants learning how to use their cameras

took photographs to record and express their experiences (Figure 1). Each site visit was followed by feedback interviews and workshops at the beginning of the following week's session.

Use of the photography was based around the methodology of participant-led photo elicitation. Theoretical understandings of this technique represent the choice of objects and views photographed by a participant as demonstrative of their values and preferences (Harper, 2002). However, it is important to recognise that cultural conventions in photography (for example taking photos of friends, arranging photos of self in prestigious locations, taking photos of extensive views) may influence choice of subject. We found that varying the photographic tasks and types of reflective activities encouraged participants to use photography in less conventional ways, maintained interest in the research throughout the project and opened up new areas for discussion.

Activities were developed on a week by week basis depending on the nature of the site visit, the numbers of participants attending, the weather and special events. The most common method used was free-choice photos during the site visit, followed by individual interviews discussing the photographs the following week. On a couple of occasions, participants were given specific photographic tasks, such as taking photos in the park that illustrated their perceptions of 'beautiful', 'play', 'relax' and 'worry', undertaking a 'photo diary' of their weekly routes and taking photos on the theme of 'streetscape' to submit to a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website competition. Although the selection of these activities was undoubtedly subject to researcher bias, these tasks provided a springboard for discussion that compared the perceptions and experiences of the members of the group, including the researchers.

As participants became more comfortable and confident within the group we found it productive to facilitate group discussions. In developing these reflective exercises we found we were often adapting techniques used in educational and planning participation contexts. We devised a range of interactive activities, such as the making of 'postcards' of their visit by sticking together photographs and writing on the back. We produced a collage of one visit to prompt discussion, asked participants to arrange issues in order of importance and once used drawing as a means of talking about activities in parks. Employing an educational model of individual work that collectively informs group

discussions gave participants confidence in their contributions and in expression of different opinions.

From Fieldwork to Findings

The combination of visual, participatory, longitudinal and experiential methods that were used in the Viewfinder project provided us with rich and diverse research material. This included photographs, interview transcripts, site observations and material from group activities. The longitudinal and experimental nature of the project allowed us to feed emerging findings into ongoing discussions with participants and partners, providing a useful reflective loop. In this way, analysis and theory formulation were a continuous process and our understandings of the participants' perspectives and experiences of POS gradually gained depth and detail.

What distinguishes the methodology of this project in particular from previous research into experience of POS is, firstly, that it was designed to work with newcomers, or 'outsiders' to POS in the UK; and secondly, that it combined methods that allowed for both immediate, in-the-field responses to POS and reflections on the visits in the context of group relationships established over a three month period. This holistic, in-depth approach illuminated complexities in experience and perception that may have otherwise been overlooked or misunderstood.

For example, (Figure 2) shows Lamin, a group member from Liberia, now a refugee living in Sheffield, amongst hanging baskets at Heeley City Farm. Understanding both the context and consequences of this photograph is crucial to understanding Lamin's experiences of this neighbourhood green space.

Lamin requested that this photograph was taken of him and carefully positioned himself amongst the colourful flowers. Two particularly interesting points can be made here. Firstly, this act reflects a cultural convention and desire to be photographed, in this case in a place considered to be beautiful. Knowing this helps us to understand the way Lamin photographed the green spaces we visited. Secondly, Lamin's immediate expressions of the novelty, beauty and Britishness of the scene, and his later reflections on the visit to the community farm, gave us understanding of his ideas about beauty, the



Figure 2. Lamin in the horticultural greenhouse at Heeley City Farm (self-pose)

UK, his own identity, the purposes of POS and his ambitions. He saw the farm as somewhere where he could get involved: “I would go there, there is something to do, some volunteering for one or two hours, I can do it”. Lamin also told us about his grandfather’s farm, and that one day, when he has a house, he would like to hang one of these beautiful baskets of flowers on its wall.

Similarly, Firmina’s photograph of the Rivelin Valley cannot be categorised simplistically (Figure 3). The taking of the photograph, together with her behaviour in the valley, such as playing in the stream and watching the ducks, and the photograph-initiated individual and group discussions, told us about Firmina’s feelings of peace and relaxation in this place: “Yeah, Rivelin Valley! I really liked it! Especially summer time, it’s very, very relaxing, walking with people, talking each other, your private life like that you know, it’s really nice”. Discussions also revealed her need for company on such visits, and connections with childhood memories of playing in woods and among rocks.

The cumulative collection of images and other material and the ongoing reflection on them generated a number of key research themes (Davies, 1999). We found memory and nostalgia to be very important in participants’ experiences, and this was combined with cultural surprise and the novelty of visiting new forms of urban green space. Though participants had strong positive experiences of the site visits, these seldom translated into increased independent visits during the four month period of contact. Sustained engagement only occurred when participants could envisage a personal benefit, such as opportunities to socialise, play sport and enjoy plants. These possibilities only became realistic when physical and psychological barriers were overcome, most usually in the case of busy city centre sites. Factors which caused detachment could be the result of site characteristics—especially safety and illegibility—and individuals’ life situations. Often participants did not have the confidence to explore new places independently, and the lack of social contexts for visiting green spaces was key in limiting use (Rishbeth & Finney, 2006).

We were keen for the findings and experiences of Viewfinder to be widely and imaginatively disseminated to reflect the inclusive nature of the project. In addition to academic papers and presentations, we have written for refugee sector and landscape architecture practitioner magazines and had local media coverage. The major public dissemination of the project was an exhibition combining photographs with research



Figure 3. Firmina’s photo of walking through the Rivelin Valley

themes and this was shown at a park festival during Refugee Week in June 2004, the Black Film Festival in Sheffield in August 2004, the Open Space conference in Edinburgh in October 2004, the Showroom Cinema, Sheffield in November 2004 and community centres and local libraries in Sheffield in December 2004 and January 2005.

Putting Theory into Practice

By using the methodologies outlined above we aimed to overcome, as far as possible, the barriers to honest communication between researchers and research participants. Many of these barriers are common to all social research situations: the need to reduce respondent bias, to build trust and to ensure reliable results (Robson, 2002). Due to the nature of our participant group, these issues needed explicit strategies to address potential methodological weaknesses, strategies we found we had to evolve and reassess throughout the duration of the research. In this sense it was 'risky research', requiring particular sensitivity and a flexible response to evolving methodologies. In telling this story, we echo the sentiment expressed by Leyshon (2002, p. 179):

As authors and readers know, the image of research progressing in a smooth and uncomplicated fashion is largely illusionary, yet often necessary to the credibility of the paper. Tales of failure or complications are often absent from the literature because authors do not wish to acknowledge disappointment and in part as these experiences are not usually welcomed in academic journals.

Below we reflect critically on the success and limitations of the methods we developed in addressing these issues.

Generating Open Communication

The recent arrival in Sheffield (and the UK) of most of the participants meant that they had been through traumatic experiences in the recent past and this required a sensitivity to their situations that sometimes precluded open conversation about their personal histories and lives. The everyday lives of the participants could be quite chaotic. During Viewfinder, for example, one participant was in the process, with the help of the government, of being reunited with his mother, who he had not seen for 10 years. This resulted in her visiting England for a short time, a momentous occasion for our participant, who, understandably, was somewhat preoccupied with this event. The participants' recent arrivals in the UK also meant that they had little orientation of the city or experience of visiting parks. This affected the research in that our visits were 'first impressions' rather than everyday experiences. It also meant that the English language abilities of the group varied greatly, with two participants speaking very limited English.

Using photography to some extent overcame language barriers. It provided a focus for conversation and a stimulus for discussion and group members could draw on their own and each other's images to illustrate the points they wished to make. Care needed to be taken to ensure that the participant, not the researcher, was responsible for interpreting the significance of the photographic choice. However, there is a limit to the extent to which visual methods can replace verbal ones and our discussions with participants with only basic English language skills were undoubtedly less in-depth and insightful than with the others. Participants varied in their ability to verbalise their motivations for taking individual photographs, and in the nuance of their interpretations of place. We found that the interview discussions on occasion became restricted and repetitious, a situation that became frustrating for both researcher and participant. This led us to diversify the

methods of reflective discussion, reducing the number of individual interviews and introducing more group activities. We were able to facilitate these in such a way that all participants voiced opinions to some extent, and the supportive presence and attitude of group members encouraged those with fewer English skills to contribute.

We made a deliberate decision not to introduce interpreters into Viewfinder. This was primarily because of a desire to treat all participants equally and to create power relations that were as balanced as possible between all members of the group. The introduction of new group members would also have disrupted the rapport that we had established. However, we did conduct interviews with group members one month after the photography course had finished and in some of these we employed interpreters. This was extremely useful in clarifying information that we had gathered throughout the main fieldwork period. It also emerged as an important opportunity for participants to feed back to us about the project and to ask us questions.

We had aimed for group members to be active participants in the process of interpreting their own experiences and identifying themes and stories that they wanted voiced (McIntyre, 2003). At the launch event and in subsequent sessions we had deliberately shown examples of similar research and included visually based activities that introduced the research themes. We defined our role as researchers at all sessions. (These were obviously essential aspects of our ethical requirement for informed consent.) In the initial planning for the Viewfinder sessions we had allocated significant time towards the end of the project in order for the group to work together on material for the exhibition. As the project progressed it became clear that this well-intentioned ambition was unrealistic with this participant group. Their backgrounds were entirely removed from any context of higher education, and their experiences of life had not brought them into any previous contact with research, research findings or researchers. As such, we suspect that they generally had very little understanding of our professional aims. This cultural divide, coupled with the varying standards of English, meant that as a group they had little inclination or learned ability to collate and order this kind of information, and their participation in the full scope of the project was more limited than we had anticipated. Nevertheless, the methodologies employed did support some direction of the research process by individuals: the choice of engaging in different activities on site, subjects for photography, personal information volunteered and some control of the direction of discussion topics.

In many research situations, respondents enjoy the chance to actively engage with research and the reflective opportunities provided by interviews and focus groups (Robson, 2002). However, our experience in this project suggests that for this contribution to move beyond immediate responses to a more considered evaluation of research themes, there needs to be a basic cultural understanding of the nature of research activity. We tentatively suggest that this may also be the case with other participant groups which are similarly removed from academic experience: for example young children or people with particular learning disabilities. This is not to imply that the validity and importance of their immediate responses is in any way diminished, and it is certainly an area that would benefit from further enquiry.

The shared experience between participants and researchers of on-site visits was vital to our research, and was a highly successful aspect of the methodology. These situations provided a relaxed environment where participants chatted with researchers informally both regarding their immediate impressions of the visit and about general aspects of their life. In participating together in admiring views, negotiating stepping stones, feeding ducks and playing on the swings, we were able to achieve an informality and sense of



Figure 4. Researcher record of on-site exploration

shared humanity that diminished the differences of our culture, status, age or gender (Figure 4). These times often gave rise to the richest stories and observations by participants. Especially in the woodland and heathland locations, a number of participants volunteered recollections of their homeland:

It remind me a lot my country because my country there are lots of big rocks...in my country they're bigger than this...they are very, very big and people they used to climb them you know, go up them then sit up on them. (Firmina, from Rwanda)

Some rocks in the park also reminded me of Afghanistan...I used to go climbing. Especially in the village where we used to go at weekends, it was in the foothills of the mountains and we would go climbing. (Mansoor, from Afghanistan)

We were also able to observe how participants behaved in the different types of POS. The visits were guided by the researchers, though participants tended to control the pace and length of time spent at individual features. There are obvious limitations in comparing a group visit to how a participant might act if visiting independently, but it was possible to observe which aspects of the places engaged and delighted participants, and which proved to be uninteresting. Making any recordings on site would have been counter-productive to the development of rapport and trust. Therefore, our research practice was to discuss our on-site experiences and conversations together immediately after the visit, and afterwards write up our observations as fully as possible.

The longitudinal nature of the research was crucial to the project's success. It allowed us to gently gather information and build mutual understandings. The participants were motivated to remain involved for 12 weeks because of the establishment of relationships and enjoyable routine. There are, of course, resource and time implications. The three month period required a high level of commitment from all partners and participants and necessitated a thoughtful exit strategy (Leyshon, 2002). Though the regular training sessions came to a formal end in August 2004, participants seemed to appreciate us making arrangements to meet with them for individual interviews a month later, and the

exhibition launch in the cinema in November 2004 provided a future date to anticipate. TIV was also able to give information about further training courses open to participants. It is rare for research projects to be able to 'request' this frequency and length of contact with participants, and this privileged position was only possible due to the provision of a training course.

In summary, the combination of visual, longitudinal and experiential methods that we employed overcame linguistic, cultural and social barriers in the Viewfinder group, thereby enabling us to develop in-depth understandings of perceptions and experiences of public open spaces. This methodology was made possible through a collaboration that linked the research to a photography training course. However, this partnership was not without challenges.

Challenges of Collaboration

This research was collaborative in the sense that there was an organisational partnership between the researchers (the university) and TIV. Contact was made with TIV through a mutual acquaintance and although the initial idea for the project came from us, their input was instrumental in the development of the project and making the ideas a reality. The collaboration was intended to be mutually beneficial: TIV would benefit from the knowledge, resources and prestige of working with the university; we would benefit from the knowledge, skills and contacts of TIV. By providing a training course, we aimed to share the benefit of the research situation with participants, thereby making it less exploitative, and to secure a setting for longitudinal research.

Authors advise that expectations, rules, roles and procedures should be clearly defined at the beginning of a collaboration (White *et al.*, 2004). In the early stages of Viewfinder it was agreed that TIV would take responsibility for the photography training including recruitment, teaching, course materials and equipment, accreditation and certification, and funding. We would take responsibility for the site visits, leading reflective practice and for exhibitions and dissemination of the project. It was envisaged that joint responsibility would be taken for the planning of the sessions. This split of responsibilities was formalised by us each applying for funding to cover the costs of our relevant aspects of the project.

We also took a number of conscious steps to set ourselves up as equals to TIV and to dispel the myth of the university and its researchers as detached from 'real' people and 'real' life. Savvakis & Tzanakis (2004) have argued that the way the researcher enters the field of enquiry and how s/he is received can affect the 'results' of the research. Their case studies illustrate, for example, how the perceived 'professional' status of the researchers lent a negative bias to the research whereas the common geographical origin of the researcher and the participants led to positive bias in the research situation. Our attempts at 'staging ourselves' (de Laine, 2000) were centred around downplaying the traditional powerful position of the university. For example, the project was located at our partner's premises and we had 'gone into' the photography training context of TIV and had largely been accepted into it. We had to quickly learn to adapt to TIV's working cultures and attitudes, which were very different from those we were used to in the university primarily because of the constant financial insecurity of the organisation and its staff. By adapting our expectations and approach we were able to maintain a harmonious and productive working relationship.

However, two key issues regarding collaboration with a partner external to academia emerged during the project. These had significant implications for the research and

required us to respond creatively and flexibly and also be prepared to release control over some aspects of the research situation. As noted by Robson (2002, p. 216), "If notions of collaboration and participation are taken seriously, then some power of decision about aspects of the design and data collection are lost to the researcher. This may well be a price worth paying".

The first key issue was changes to the plans for funding and resourcing of the project. This challenge became evident in the early stages and continued throughout. It resulted from TIV not managing to secure funding for the elements of the project for which it was responsible. This created an atmosphere of uncertainty that became characteristic of the context for project management and required adaptations to be made on a daily and weekly basis. For example, there were occasions when transport and refreshments had to be provided for the group by TIV yet firm arrangements could not be made as a result of funding uncertainties. This necessitated back-up plans to be put in place but, more crucially, it required us to place trust and control of the situation with TIV. Although we could have intervened, financially and otherwise, it was important for us to respect alternative methods of dealing with difficult situations and to relinquish this control. TIV did, on the whole, address the problems raised by funding limitations, and presented us with new ways to deal with such situations.

The most significant way in which the changes to funding arrangements affected the research project, however, was in the recruitment of the participant group. TIV originally applied for funding from a regional regeneration fund and this application was unsuccessful. Less than two months before the Viewfinder start date it managed to secure some basic underwriting for the project from the Refugee Housing Association, and as a result we committed to enrolling asylum seekers and refugees in the project. The original research design had specified a broader group of immigrants. Working with refugee and asylum seeker participants had several implications. Firstly, they were recently arrived immigrants and therefore had limited knowledge of Sheffield and its POSs and, in most cases, of the English language. Secondly, they were living in situations of uncertainty financially, socially and culturally and had suffered, in the relatively recent past, traumatic experiences. This had implications for trust building within the group and for practicalities of attendance, timekeeping and travel. It was necessary for us to design the Viewfinder sessions with sensitivity to the participants' situations. This resulted in more in-depth work with a smaller group than originally anticipated and more visits to POSs.

The second key issue of collaboration that had implications for the research was the provision of training. The combination of training and research was the most innovative, and therefore most risky, element of the research design. It required us to hand over control of a crucial element of the project to our partners and, therefore, be prepared to adapt our expectations. The photography training provided by TIV was more basic and less structured than we had envisaged. This meant that the participants' photography skills did not allow them to express their experiences of POS through photography with the subtleties that we hoped they would develop. Nevertheless, photography proved a fruitful and enjoyable medium for exploring the sites. In addition, the less rigorous demands of the training gave us more time and space to undertake creative research activities and make visits to a greater number and variety of POSs.

The different concepts of photography training provision and the purpose of the training led to tensions within the group as we attempted to balance our responsibilities to the participants with maintaining a partnership with TIV. We were deeply concerned about the photography training and feared that participants would be unhappy with the

situation and feel they were not receiving 'due payment' for their commitment. Though we did not at any point provide training for participants, in TIV taking a lesser role we emerged as *de facto* course leaders. In offering participants access to our knowledge, such as about Sheffield or the asylum system, and in making extra efforts to keep the sessions interesting, we were undoubtedly trying to compensate for our perceptions of the inadequacies of the training (de Laine, 2000).

In his account of a research project with teenagers in rural areas, Leyshon (2002) reflected on the occasional incompatibility of research rigour and ethical considerations, and suggested that these dilemmas can be "addressed, if not overcome" (p. 179). By being flexible in our research design and expectations and being prepared to relinquish control in some aspects of the research situation we were able to turn difficulties into opportunities for valuable research material and insights. However, the collaboration with TIV was, at times, a stressful experience with many tensions. In this regard it was immensely valuable working as a pair of researchers, and reflecting on the research process became an inherent part of our working relationship. We met formally and informally almost on a daily basis to discuss the project and after the weekly fieldwork sessions we spent some time debriefing. This became an invaluable method of negotiating our frustrations and anxieties and trying to develop coping strategies and solutions. This reflexive process focused our thoughts on how our positions and preconceptions were affecting the project and the situated knowledge we were producing (Kobayashi, 2001; Rose, 1997).

Ideally, collaborative partnerships "are based on mutual trust and respect, so that members can communicate openly. Ultimately, the goal of such relationships is to develop a non-hierarchical partnership that acknowledges the strengths and perspectives of all the parties" (White *et al.*, 2004, p. 55). In this way an intersect is created between the 'lived worlds' (Habermas (1987), cited in Savvakis & Tzanakis (2004)) of all those involved in which fresh power relations can be established. Although we did work with an ethos of trust and respect, in our collaboration with TIV, we were by no means 'inhabiting each other's castles' (Somekh, 2002). Although we made considerable efforts to engage with TIV on its terms, working with partners outside academia inevitably has implications for how the research and the needs of the research are understood. Despite our efforts, we felt that our partner was not always fully aware of our motivations and requirements in terms of the research.

Collaborating with a partner outside academia was, undoubtedly, essential for the project's inception and beneficial for all concerned. However, whether one is working with community organisations or government departments, it is easy to underestimate the potential gulf between the two cultures. Partners are unlikely to fully appreciate the methodology, rigours and parameters of academic research, and researchers are unlikely to fully understand their partners' constraints and daily priorities. We were by no means novices in working with organisations comparable to TIV, yet it was impossible for us to forecast specific misunderstandings. In developing such collaborations a great deal can be negotiated and compensations can be planned, but ultimately researchers must be prepared to deal with tensions, to be flexible and to share control of the research situation. Equally, there is a need for research funding bodies to be sympathetic and even supportive of the probable adaptations that will occur in this type of collaborative research. It is possible, then, for immensely rich and valuable research material to be generated, albeit different from what may have initially been envisaged.

Producing Mutually Beneficial Research

The methodological design of the Viewfinder project was intended to reduce the exploitative nature of research encounters: to be an ethical undertaking from which all those involved could benefit. Much has been written, particularly within sociological literature, about the ethics of social research (Davies, 1999). It has become unacceptable to engage research subjects without their informed consent and assurance that involvement will not result in any harm to the participants (British Sociological Association, 2002). Some, particularly feminist researchers and those developing participatory methods, have taken this further, advocating projects in which the researchers are not the sole beneficiaries (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Providing shared benefits was one of the prime motivations for combining research with training. As researchers, we were not only able to investigate our topic of interest, but gained an insight into the possibilities of new research methodologies. The provision of training over a period of three months facilitated conducting longitudinal research and creating a situation of open communication. It also overcame some of the difficulties often associated with recruiting and retaining immigrant and refugee participants because it offered structure, a safe, welcoming environment and tangible benefits (Bloch, 1999; Miller, 2004).

TIV benefited by establishing important links with the university and other organisations and demonstrating its ability to work in such situations and fulfil the requirements of its funders. It also benefited from an insight into research and our working culture, as we did from the insight into its. TIV expressed keen interest about undertaking similar collaborations in the future.

The project benefited the participants not only in terms of gaining photography skills and an Open College Network certificate. Being involved was itself part of the socialisation and integration of participants in terms of development of language skills, social skills and self-confidence; the opportunity to discuss concerns; and learning about the place in which they live. After one of the Saturday Viewfinder sessions, one participant was asked about his plans for the week and he replied that he had been thinking so much about the day that he had not really thought past it. For him, Viewfinder was an extremely important part of his life.

Encouraged by Viewfinder one participant has recently been involved in a project with the BBC and others have expressed interest in finding out more about photography and the media. Several have enquired about study at the university and our presence may have served to break down some barriers about the accessibility of this for them. Two participants have found jobs using references from TIV which were based on their performance during Viewfinder.

Participants were also given the opportunity to be involved in something that did not focus on their immigration status: photography is a mainstream activity and the university is a mainstream organisation. The topic, too, valued their input as people with particular experiences, rather than as objects of a particular political system or policy implementation. This no doubt contributed to the participants' positive responses to the project.

The dissemination of the Viewfinder project through the touring exhibition was particularly beneficial for the partners and participants involved. The exhibition raised the profile of the project and made it accessible to a wide audience thereby giving a sense of satisfaction and a boost to self-esteem to us, the participants and TIV. Furthermore, the

exhibition contributed towards the promotion of positive images of asylum seekers and refugees (Home Office, 2005).

Maintaining Validity in Research Findings

We have argued so far that by innovatively combining visual, experiential, participatory and longitudinal approaches, and by being reflexive and flexible, we were able to create a research situation of open communication and mutual benefit. This generated a richness and depth of research material and understanding that may otherwise not have been possible. We have addressed some of the strengths and weaknesses in both planned and enacted methodologies, with discussion of how this has influenced research findings. However, it is important also to consider the overall implications of our methodology for the validity of our empirical findings about perceptions and experiences of POS.

We faced two major challenges to the validity of the research findings in this project. The first was ensuring that our interpretations of the participants' comments and images were accurate and truly represented their perceptions and experiences. Linked to this, we were mindful of the ever-present potential for researcher bias. This was made particularly difficult by the language barrier with some of the group members. However, as Morgan (1997) argues, these issues are most problematic when they are ignored. Through triangulation and a reflexive focus throughout the project, we were confident that we were not misrepresenting participants (Rose, 1997). Having close contact with the participants over three months enabled trusting relations to be built and for interpretations to be checked.

The second major challenge was that the small number of participants limited our ability to compare perceptions and experiences, and possibly threw up fewer ideas for exploration during the project than would a larger group. In hindsight, however, the deficiencies in breadth in this project were more than made up for in the depth and richness of the material that we gathered. Had the group been larger we might not have established the intimacy and trust that ultimately made the methodology a success. Although some have argued that generalisations can be made by using qualitative techniques (Silverman, 2001), we concur more with Mason's (1996) assertion that explanations can have 'wider resonance'. Indeed, we hope that both the methodology that we employed and our theoretical conclusions (Rishbeth & Finney, 2006) will be tested by other researchers.

Conclusions

The Viewfinder project aimed to combine methods and approaches to produce a research situation that would engage a marginalised group and enable open communication and shared benefits. Particular focus was placed on gaining depth of understanding of individuals' perceptions and experience of POS by prioritising visual, experiential, participatory and longitudinal methods. This paper is an open critique of our experience that highlights successes but does not shy away from discussing the difficulties we encountered (Leyshon, 2002).

Several aspects of the methodology showed particular potential for development in both research and consultation exercises about POS. The combination of research with photography training facilitated a focus on visual methods, site visits and longitudinal research. These were all crucial in developing trust and establishing an environment of open and honest communication, and these issues were particularly pertinent for the asylum seeker and refugee participants involved (Miller, 2004). In-depth understandings

of the group's perceptions and experiences were built up because of the variety of types of research material collected and the sustained contact during the three month project. Using photography also to some extent overcame linguistic and cultural barriers and allowed the participants to direct and tell their own stories.

Perhaps the most successful individual element of the methodology was the focus on visits to POS. The outings were fun and informal and produced very rich research material that captured the subtleties and immediacy of participants' responses to place. However, the full benefit of this method was only reaped when combined with follow-up interviews and activities that allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and their visual documentation of them.

The collaboration with partners outside academia was not without problems particularly in relation to funding and provision of training. The uncertainties that resulted could have to some extent been overcome if we had ensured our partners had a thorough and committed understanding of our motivations and the needs of the research. 'Inhabiting each other's castles' (Somekh, 2002) prior to collaboration would certainly have minimised stress and uncertainty during fieldwork.

However, by responding to the tensions and dilemmas in a flexible and creative manner, and by being prepared to share control of the research situation, we were able to convert challenges into opportunities for the research (Hill, 2004; Robson, 2002). This necessitated a focus on reflexivity that encouraged us to examine the nature of the material we were collecting (Rose, 1997) leading, ultimately, to a more thorough research project.

The methodological experiences of the Viewfinder project illustrate the potential for landscape and planning research of adopting creative methodologies that combine qualitative techniques to generate very in-depth research. Focusing on the experiential, using photography and taking time to nurture relationships and collect material were particularly successful here. Many of the ideas discussed in this paper also have resonance for consultation processes, particularly those that are concerned with understanding the perceptions and experiences of marginalised communities.

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Notes

1. More information on the Planning for Real technique can be found on the Neighbourhood Initiative Foundation's website www.nif.co.uk/planningforreal/ (accessed 8 November 2005).
2. TIV is a pseudonym.

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