

Reflections

Communicating back: reflections on IBZM as participatory dissemination – commentary on Valli

SOFIA CELE



Cele, S. (2021) Communicating back: reflections on IBZM as participatory dissemination – commentary on Valli. *Fennia* 199(1) 136–138. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.109264>

This paper reflects on Interviews-Based-Zine-Making as participatory dissemination as explored by Valli in this issue of *Fennia*. It discusses three main aspects of the approach. The first aspect relates to IBZM as being dissemination of result or an additional research method. The second focuses on the entanglements between representation and the potential tensions and conflicts that may arise when the workshop participants read interview transcripts from other members of the community. The third aspect focuses on interpretation and how to deal with the thin line between representation of research participants' understandings of interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretation and analysis of these.

Keywords: participatory dissemination, workshop, qualitative methods, zine-making, participatory methods

Sofia Cele (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9291-5168>), Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Box 513, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden. E-mail: sofia.cele@kultgeog.uu.se

Introduction

Doing participatory research is a blessing and a curse. A blessing because it provides such valuable material and closeness to your research participants. But closeness is also a difficulty, if perhaps not a curse. At some point you normally start to distance yourself from your research subjects and return to academia. Often with an empty feeling of not communicating back as much as you would like to.

The difficulties in dealing with closeness and distance in participatory qualitative methods, and how to disseminate your results and give back to community have been widely discussed. However, few people actually address this in practice.

Chiara Valli has studied gentrification processes in Bushwick, New York, and in particular the role of cultural workers in gentrification processes and the emotional consequences for long-term residents (Valli 2015, 2017). It is not surprising that Valli after having worked with in-depth participatory methods as well as with visual and art-based methods now continues to explore participatory dissemination methods in order to give back to the community and find ways to disseminate research results.

Participatory dissemination engages research participants in the interpretation of preliminary research findings. The method Valli explores is a creative approach that she calls Interviews-Based-Zine-Making (IBZM). Briefly described this is done through a zine making workshop. Valli has chosen 16 of her 40 in-depth interviews with people in the Bushwick community and written short summaries of these using the research subjects' own words. The workshop participants use the interview

transcripts as the base for discussion and later cut and paste these into a (or several) zine(s). The finished zine is then distributed in the community.

Valli's approach to give back to the community she has been doing research in is impressive and genuine. This does not mean that the method is perfect, nor is it streamlined or un-problematic. But then, what is in the messy reality of the world-out-there?

Valli has chosen to follow the suggestion of Routledge (1996, 403) to "live theory as a series of practices – experimental, experiential, imaginative" and wishes to achieve what she calls participatory dissemination. She wants to share the research results with people in the community but also do this as a participatory practice. Thus, dissemination of results as communication and dialogue rather than a researcher telling participants what their lives are about.

Valli's contribution is exploratory. She does not claim to know all the answers or present a perfect approach to how participatory dissemination should be performed. Refreshingly, a reflective approach enables Valli to comment on her own mistakes and suggest how her practice can be improved. While reading Valli's (2021) text there are a number of aspects that particularly intrigue me, and that may need further discussion in the future.

Dissemination of results or method?

The first aspect concerns the relationship between IBZM as being dissemination of results and it being a method. Valli (2021) uses the term participatory dissemination, but what is actually described is to a large extent the gathering of even more research material. The participants react to interview transcripts, they discuss amongst each other and they also interact with Valli herself in this process. The finished zine is of course also useful material in a research process.

The result of the discussion and the zine is of course very dependent on the interview transcripts that Valli has chosen to include in the workshops. The framing of the IBZM as dissemination of results is not uncomplicated. It could be viewed as unsuitable (almost unethical?) to not recognize the zine-making workshops as a method and hence not take the result into account. Valli is not unaware of the fine line between method and dissemination of results and reflects to some extent about this in the paper.

However, I see it as crucial to acknowledge the complex ethical issues that might arise during the workshop sessions. This calls for emphasizing the process of IBZM as a research method that communicates back to the community. 'Dissemination of (preliminary) results' has an unproblematic ring to it that fails to include the complexity of the method that Valli describes. Valli's own approach towards the participants seems reflective, open and empathic. She is aware of the complex and ethical issues that might arise during these processes. But it is important to bring forward this dual nature of the approach in order to be able to problematize the complexity of the method and process.

Representation and conflict

The second aspect relates more directly to how the research participants react to the interview transcripts and how this, in turn, might affect the community. As recognized by Valli (2021), the selection of interview transcripts is just as important as the initial selection of the interviewees. There are endless possibilities to steer the workshop discussion, to plant conflict in the community and just generally provide biased material if this is not problematized enough.

The method involves members of the community who read, react to, and make a zine out of interview transcripts. Depending on the size and closeness of the community there is definitely a risk that participants recognize the interviewees even if attempts have been made to hide their identity. There could also be difficulties with participants agreeing with their transcripts being used and read by other members of the community even if they have been anonymized. However, these things can be solved with reflective awareness and care.

A serious consequence that needs to be properly considered though, is that when participants read what other people of the community have said, this can increase conflict and anger just as easily as it could increase mutual understanding. How the process turns out is of course dependent on how the process is led, the degree of existing conflict in the community and the individual participants in the

workshops and interviews. In Valli's case she describes how some of the workshop participants react negatively towards what is expressed in the interviews, but that there was no conflict between the workshop participants. If the selection of interviews is insensitive this can cause anger and conflict among the participants or in the community. However, it would also be unsuitable to filter the contributions in a way so that it does not cause conflict. Thus, there is an ethical minefield and numerous difficult decisions to make in connection to this process. But again, this is not an argument against the method. It is a call for a continuous exploration and reflection surrounding the many twists and turns that are connected to IBZM.

Layers of interpretation

A third aspect that is interesting to explore further relates to the potential difficulty that can arise when the participants do not agree with, or recognize, what is expressed in the interviews. There can also be interpretations made by the workshop participants that are completely different from the interpretations made by the researcher. Valli (2021, 37) emphasizes that if the researcher and the participants disagree "the zine-makers have the ultimate right to interpret and represent the given material as they wish". The zine is not an outlet for Valli's (2021, 37) own interpretations but a "parallel, complementary outlet to a beyond-academic audience". This is an important distinction and statement.

However, there are still some issues to untangle here. If IBZM is to be called dissemination of (preliminary) results is it enough to provide participants with interview transcripts disconnected from interpretation? But again, if you provide your interpretation and it is different from that of the workshop participants where do you draw the line between dissemination of your results and their participation in interpreting and reflecting on the material? Where is the line between representation of their views and your analysis? And if the researcher and the workshop participants disagree who has the right to interpretation? How should you deal with this in the research process? Valli (2021) clearly states that her analysis is expressed elsewhere – in academic papers and in her dissertation. This is a straightforward and sensible approach, but it could also be seen as expressing power if the analysis goes against what is outspokenly expressed in the workshops.

There is no simple answer and this conflict is not unique to this method/process. However, the more participatory you get the more obvious it also becomes that the interpretations we make of people and communities are not representations of their views, but interpretations that they might not necessarily always agree with. What part of our results should we disseminate back to participants? And what should we do if our results are not well received?

IBZM might to some extent hold the answer to some of these if not all questions. It is a creative method that allows for multiple voices to be expressed simultaneously, and these voices can be contradictory, messy and conflicted just as they can be in tune with each other. Valli's (2021) work with developing this research practice (and may I call it research method?) is genuinely important and her paper is an inspiring account of her process of giving back to the community she has researched.

References

- Routledge, P. (1996) The third space as critical engagement. *Antipode* 28(4) 399–419. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1996.tb00533.x>
- Valli, C. (2015) A sense of displacement: long-time residents' feelings of displacement in gentrifying Bushwick, New York. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39(6) 1191–1208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12340>
- Valli, C. (2017) *Pushing borders: cultural workers in the restructuring of post-industrial cities*. Geographica 14. Doctoral thesis. Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1084525/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Valli, C. (2021) Participatory dissemination: bridging in-depth interviews, participation, and creative visual methods through Interview-Based Zine-Making (IBZM). *Fennia* 199(1) 25–45. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.99197>