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The affective quality of sound: repositioning the listener

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the possibilities of performative research practices in the dissemination of social science research. The paper introduces the benefits of these practices and demonstrates the relational benefits of sound. The paper explores the benefit of sound in repositioning the listener to a new way of hearing.

Design Methodology

This research emerged from a larger research project investigating the silent racism that was evident in an inclusive education program. A constructivist narrative approach was adopted to investigate the benefits of the sensorial qualities of sound by sharing the findings from this project as an aural excerpt.

Findings

The paper highlights the relationship between the storyteller and the listener. Conveying the visceral and affective quality of Christian's personal experience through sound demonstrates the possibility of repositioning the listener. The aim here is to reposition the listener from their own cultural value systems to being open to new layers of understanding.

Research limitations

This paper reports on the experiences of one participant. It is not designed to represent the experiences of all young people with African heritage, but rather to present the possibilities of using sound in research to convey deeply personal stories.

Originality/value

The methodological approach of this paper offers a unique and valuable contribution to the growing interest in new avenues to disseminate research findings that convey the personal experience of participants.

Keywords: performative research practices, sound practices, silent racism, African-Australian youth, listener, affective quality, visceral

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Introduction

Research findings in the social sciences are traditionally disseminated in a written form, through articles, chapters, books and reports, designed to protect the integrity of the study and the privacy of individuals. These written forms often struggle, though, to convey the profound depth of the participants' experience. The focus of this article is the deeply personal experience of racism and social exclusion experienced by young people of diverse African backgrounds in Australia. It is difficult in research to represent an experience that cannot be measured or assigned a value, and to convey the emotions and feelings embedded in a participant's story (Jacobs 2015, p. 483).

Innovative ways of disseminating personal experience have been embraced by documentary directors and producers, marketers, bloggers and web design. Yet, the traditional approaches to disseminating research in the social sciences have restricted the capacity to embrace new forms of communication. Visual mediums including film, video and social media have been widely explored over the past ten years for their potential to convey the personal nature of experience, yet the benefits of sound in the dissemination of research are still largely under explored (Azul 2009; Finer 2015; Jacobs 2015; Pink 2009).

There is a demand though for new ways of disseminating research findings in the social sciences, particularly for issues that demand social action. In recent years there has been a growing acknowledgment of the possibilities that the multi-sensoral, multi-modal qualities of performative research practices offer (Gergen and Gergen 2011; Jacobs 2015; Pink 2009). These approaches present a particular challenge in the contemporary social sciences, a challenge that is largely shaped by the links of performativity to the fiction that is created in performance and the 'capacity to (mis)represent and manipulate time and place via the edit or framing' to create a narrative that may not be evidence based (Jacobs 2015, p. 483). In a contemporary context, performativity can also be understood within a neoliberalist framework, where knowledge is measured not by whether 'it is true', 'is it just' or is it 'morally important?' but by whether 'it is efficient?', "Is it marketable?" and "Is it sellable" (Bloland 1995, p. 536). Performativity in this sense restricts the researchers' capacity to represent the 'ineffable quality' (Jacobs 2015, p. 483) of experience.

Narrow stereotypes and pre-existing racism

Increasingly though, scholars are looking for innovative ways to convey research findings, particularly those that investigate a significant personal issue (Gergen & Gergen 2011). The emerging discourse around young people of African backgrounds in Australia is a significant issue. They have been positioned as a 'problem group' identified by their African heritage, regardless of whether they are citizens or new arrivals (Harris 2013, MacDonald 2017, Windle 2008). International security concerns around young, male refugees have merged in an Australian context with narrow stereotypes of young people with African heritage as the 'perpetrators of public violence' (MacDonald 2017, p. 1183), threatening to take over or 'overrun' our public spaces (Windle 2017). Windle (2008, p. 554) argues that there is evidence of 'pre-existing institutional racism and racializing narrative frames' in the way these young people have become the object of intense media and political attention in Australia. Media reporting and political comment have reinforced mechanisms of control and a socio-political legitimization of knowledge that has perpetuated negative discourse and social exclusion, leaving little space for their everyday experiences of racism to be heard.

Sound as a communication medium

It is difficult to separate the study of voice and sound, and they are often confused, yet sound is a different medium. Like voice, sound is 'produced by, and productive of, relations, geographies and subjectivities' (Kanngieser 2012, p. 337). They are both imbued with identity, history and culture (Macpherson et al. 2015). Yet, voices can be heard and analysed in isolation, while sound is relational and dependent on the active engagement of the listener. There are two subject positions in a constructionist analysis of narratives, the storyteller and the listener. Both are influenced by their personal, social, cultural and political worlds, invested in their own subject position (Esin, Fathi & Squire 2013). While the story teller tells their own unique story, meaning is constructed by the listener who is influenced by their own understanding of the social context of the story (Esin, Fathi & Squire 2013). The listener is already positioned to hear a particular truth, one that reflects their own cultural value systems and understandings (Macpherson et al. 2015, p. 215). As Bakhtin (1986, p. 68) suggests, when the listener perceives and understands the meaning ... of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude to it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it". It is the position of the listener that is the focus of this paper, as it is 'only the person who listens [that] hears' (Dietze in Kanngieser 2012, p. 336).

It is possible that the value of sound in this context has been caught up in wider critiques around the authenticity of voice (Jackson and Mazzei 2009). Arguments here critique the privileging of voice as evidence of the truth, but they go beyond this, criticising the selection of participants, contending that researchers choose the voice that 'we can easily name, categorize, and respond to' (Jackson & Mazzei 2009, p. 4). This critique of voice suggests that the transgressive voice is overlooked by researchers as it is difficult to represent. In this paper the story of a young man is offered as a transgressive voice as his experience challenges the legitimization of knowledge and deeply entrenched socio-political discourse and public opinion around young people of African heritage.

Adopting performative research practices in this context enables an investigation of 'passionate inquiry' and to challenge the identity, practices, reliability and validity of the discipline (Gergen & Gergen 2011). Ethical considerations around the confidentiality of data and the privacy of the participant are key aspects of qualitative research and this paper is not suggesting that these should be overlooked. The challenges of how to protect participants from the vitriol so regularly witnessed on social media are still to be addressed, but the research space is designed to protect and the use of pseudonyms and the absence of a physical image protect the identity of the storyteller. The focus on privacy has restricted the opportunity to share the emotional aspects of participant stories in different communication mediums. Using sound as a dissemination method addresses this shortcoming and makes the visceral and affective quality of a participant's story visible without revealing their identity. The use of sound in this way 'deepens the meaning' of what we hear and has the potential to change 'what we can see' or understand (Jacobs 2015, p. 485).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the benefits of incorporating sound into the dissemination of research and to demonstrate the possibility of repositioning the listener in these highly public debates. The paper demonstrates the affective quality of a participants experience by incorporating an aural excerpt from the data into the journal article. Incorporating sound files into journal articles has been done before, as in *My Vibrant Voice Story* (Azul 2009), but this method is not commonplace. Therefore, the methodological approach of this paper makes a valuable contribution to the increasing interest in innovative research dissemination.

Methodology

The exploration of sound to share the visceral and affective quality of participants' stories emerged from a larger research project that adopted a constructivist narrative inquiry approach. Adopting this approach enabled the wider context of racialisation and exclusion evident in these narratives to be analysed (Bochner & Riggs 2014, Esin, Fathi & Squire 2013). The paper investigates the experience of young Australians of African background in an inclusive education program within the highly charged media and political context that surround this issue. The young graduates of the program were invited to participate in post-schooling interviews as part of a larger investigation. The advantages of interviewing the participants after graduation removed the external pressure and expectations of the school.

The storytelling was raw and unfiltered, a personal experience of an inclusive intent that the participants did not feel was about inclusion, or even about them. Their stories revealed a silent racism, even in this inclusive education space. This is a silent racism (Trepagnier 2016) that is deeply embedded in cultural assumptions around young people of diverse African backgrounds in Australia. This is also the everyday experience of these young people. These stories are not new, with many scholars (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett 2010; Harris 2013; Windle 2008), exploring a national discourse that works to 'produce, consume, silence and contest' (Esin, Fathi & Squire 2013, p. 204) their narrative, but that is not the focus of this paper. The aim of this paper is to investigate the affective quality of the interviews and to consider the possibility of positioning the listener to hear an alternative experience of racism. The paper emerged from my own position as a listener and a desire to share not only by what the participants revealed but the visceral nature of the way they told their stories. The sound of their voices conveyed an extraordinary depth to their accounts of racism that challenges broader discourses and understandings.

Sound versus Voice

It would have been relatively straightforward to analyse the affective quality of the story through a theory of voice and to consider the cultural assumptions that inhabit the way we perceive the words and language others use (Macpherson et al, 2015, p. 204). The literature is extensive and there are multiple theories that could have explained the visceral experience from the interviews. Yet there was something primal about the young men's voice that demanded a deeper investigation. Colaizzi (1994, p. iv) makes the links between senses clear, arguing that sound 'can be both heard and felt', that:

It can even be seen with the mind's eye. It can almost be tasted and smelled. Sound can evoke responses of the five senses. Sound can paint a picture, produce a mood, trigger the senses to remember another time and place.

Sound studies are not a new phenomenon, but the focus traditionally has tended to be on the acoustic environment of speech or music, and it has largely overlooked any further theoretical study of sound and its sonic qualities (Jacobs 2015; Maeder 2013). As a result, no common approach to the study of sound has emerged from the social sciences yet a detailed exploration of the ear as a sensory organ is beyond the scope of this project. The distinction between sound and noise is important though, if we are to establish the credibility of sound in social science research. The sonic effect, according to Maeder (2013, p. 428), 'bridges the gap between sound ecology' (an observable acoustic sensation" and the 'phenomenology of sound' (linked to social practices and an individual's experience).

Inherent in this argument is the role of the listener. Sound is relational, and it is only through hearing the sound entwined in the story that the sensual quality can be experienced. Individuals' social and cultural environment play a central role in 'shaping the way they hear' and the meanings they assign to sound (Maeder 2013, p. 428). The role of the listener is key (Thomaidis & Macpherson 2015), as an openness to the perspective of the storyteller is fundamental to the capacity to hear a new truth, particularly one that challenges our nation's moral compass. Changing the way an individual hears requires re-education of 'how to hear and, as such, how to engage in the aural ways of knowing of others, and of making embodied aural knowing meaningful in scholarly understandings' (Pink 2009, p. 144). This is, unsurprisingly, a difficult task, but is required if the listener is to be repositioned to experience the way sound 'can physically *move* us as listeners' (Finer 2015, p. 180).

Context

A nation's hostility and fear

The young men in this study are all Australian citizens, having been born in Australia to parents of African heritage who arrived here as refugees or immigrants. They are young men who have been caught up in institutional and racialisation of refugees and asylum seekers of African heritage in Australia (Windle 2008, 2017). They have experienced intense media and political attention, including the political and media maelstrom that focused on youth crime in Melbourne, Australia at the end of 2017. Much has been written about young people of African heritage and a racialisation that is 'predicated on cultural rather than biological attributes' (Windle 2008, p. 555). An additional discourse of fear and hostility towards these young men emerged during 2017.

Inclusive education

In the midst of negative media reporting, political comment and emerging negative discourse a good news story emerged about a socially inclusive mentoring program designed to engage and retain African-Australia youth in school (Cowie 2017). The mentoring program was established in a Melbourne secondary school, employing older African-Australian's to mentor these young students and work with their families to assist them to complete their final years at school. On the surface, the program appears to have been successful with the young men completing secondary education and sharing their success in the public media. The stories at that time were shared though with the weighty expectation of a school keen to promote their success and families who want their young people to fit in and be successful. In the media and in private, the participants spoke of their resentment towards a program that 'singled [them] out for special treatment' (Johnston 2017). In the interviews conducted for this research the participants spoke of being removed from class to talk through their issues with the mentors. The young men spoke of being singled out and excluded from the classes that were important to completing their secondary education. They questioned the motivation of the school, suggesting that the school leadership was more interested in creating a program that would be well-regarded by their peers, than creating a program that was inclusive and supportive of the students' needs. The exploitation of the young men in the public media suggests a truth to their claim, with several of the young men refusing to speak to the media. Despite positive intentions, the darkness of a silent racism overshadows this program. Even in this space, promoted as inclusive, these young men were not immune from the pervasive nature of racism and social exclusion (Trepagnier 2016).

The participants

The interviews with these young men were not a random sample. The young men were selected as a result of their participation in the inclusive education program and the existing relationship they had with the researcher. Having told their stories in a public newspaper, ethics approval was obtained from Victoria University's HREC (HRE18-100) for this project with a view to investigating their experience within a research framework. The participants were informed about the aims of the project and encouraged to share their experiences openly. Critiques of voice have challenged the authenticity of the individuals' experience and I am conscious here that the young men may have applied a filter to the stories they chose to share (Harris 2013; Jackson and Mazzei 2009). This should not invalidate their stories though but give cause to consider 'how [and why] we listen to them' (Jackson and Mazzei 2009, p. 3).

The interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young men. The questions were designed to encourage them to share their experience in the inclusive education program before asking them specifically about their dislike of being singled out for special treatment. The following questions were posed:

- What was your experience of being on the African engagement program?
- What did you like about this program?
- What did you not like about this program?
- In the public newspaper article you and your mates suggested that you didn't like being singled out for special treatment, can you explain how that felt?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in this program?

The researcher

My position as the listener in this process is significant (Zingaro 2009). I have read the stories of the inclusive education program the young men completed. I have heard the private stories they share of an experience they do not believe was designed for inclusion. These stories are different than the ones they publicly shared in Melbourne's media. They were the stories they felt the school wanted them to tell. There is evidence of their frustration in the public media stories, but the focus is on the success of the problem and not their annoyance at being 'singled out'. Their personal stories reveal a different experience of the inclusive education program, one which speaks to the impact of racism in their everyday lives. This is a part of a broader story of a deep seated racism that is often alluded to but rarely explored. A story which may be compelling if the listener stops, and is open, to hearing a different narrative.

Findings – Christian's story

In research it is largely the privileged position of the interviewer to experience the visceral nature of storytelling, rich with the emotion, passion and eloquence of the storyteller's voice. As I reflected on the interviews I was reminded of this privilege, struck not only by what the participants revealed, but by the way they told their story. In this analysis there were two key themes that emerged, the first a story of a silent racism that will be told elsewhere, and the second, a reflective narrative of a story that is often told, but rarely heard. These findings are presented here in a sound file that share a small aspect of Christian's story (a pseudonym that was chosen by the participant).

Sound file – 35 seconds.

Discussion – Repositioning the listener

Christian's story is not a revelation. The everyday nature of 'community perceptions, racism and discrimination' (MacDonald 2017, p. 1184) for young people of African heritage is not a new phenomenon. Many scholars have made significant contributions to understanding the experience of these young people (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett 2010; Harris 2013; Windle 2008). Media and political comment have shared the phenomenon, although this has largely worked to reinforce the mechanisms of control and legitimization of knowledge that have perpetuated the deeply entrenched socio-political discourse and social exclusion of young people of diverse African heritage.

As I listened to Christian's story, it was difficult to be unaffected by his narrative of a silent racism and the assumption that he is an African, even though, as he states, he was born here and has never left the country. The sound of racism in this moment resonated as a nation's hostility and rejection were laid bare. The inability of others to acknowledge Christian as a young Australian rather than an African refugee or immigrant is striking. The affective quality of his lament that 'It's just always African', was unmistakable. His appeal for others to focus on 'me as a person and everything that comes with me' rather than as an African has greater authority with the sound of his voice than can be replicated in the written form. The visceral nature of the experience providing a layer of understanding that may not otherwise be shared. I reflect on the privilege to hear this deeply personal experience, one that affects him everyday and cries out to be heard. I know that the words I put on paper cannot do justice to his lament but I also question whether I am the audience he wants to hear.

Christian's story is a narrative of the embodied experience of racism, but it is equally a narrative about listeners and their capacity, or incapacity, to hear. It is a narrative of how the 'personal, social, cultural and political worlds' (Esin, Fathi & Squire 2013, p. 208) of individuals limit their capacity to hear a story that challenges the legitimization of knowledge and broader socio-political discourse. Introducing the sound of his exclusion into the narrative is a sensory experience, one that is unreservedly designed to move the listener. It is a story about the limitations of the social sciences to convey the affective quality of a participant's experience. In this space, the sound of racism for young people of diverse African backgrounds is heard through the media, film political comment and on social media (MacDonald 2017). Yet, scholars have layers of knowledge about the profound impact of the experience of a silent racism that has the capacity to influence others and may change perceptions.

This is a strong, more profound message than can be conveyed on paper. Enabling the sound of Christian's voice to share with a broader audience his everyday experience of racism brings an affective quality to research that cannot be communicated with the written word. This is a relational experience, designed to reposition the listener from the broader socio-political discourse surrounding young people of diverse African backgrounds to a place where they are ready to listen and open to hearing a different truth. Rather than following traditional scholarly conventions, the aim of this project was to take Christian's story and make a statement that might be heard, and, ultimately, motivate social action.

Conclusion – Incorporating sound into the dissemination of research

Sharing research findings through the performative research practice of sound is not unproblematic. The approach challenges many of the long-held practices of the social sciences. It is used here to convey the affective quality of a young man's experience, to share a different experience of a deep seated racism that has been, and continues to be, widely explored through academic scholarship

and more publicly through media and political comment. This paper has demonstrated how sound can be used to share stories that demand a passionate inquiry and motivate social action. The intent is to encourage researchers to embrace sound as a powerful medium that is relatable to a broader audience. Sharing Christian's personal experience in this paper has demonstrated the possibilities that sound offers. The affective quality of his story engages the listener and is designed to reposition their capacity to hear a narrative that challenges entrenched social, political and cultural values. The ultimate aim is to generate conversation and challenge the legitimization of knowledge that limits broader understandings of the personal and profound impact of a silent racism for young people of diverse African backgrounds.

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