

'Voice and Representation: Empowering Voice and Enacting Change Through the Arts and Humanities'

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I want to talk briefly today about my experiences with using creative methods in research on violence against women. I've found that creative representation can provide new opportunities to combat the difficulty of translating gender-specific phenomenological harms (the lived experience of harm) – such as violence against women - through enabling the apprehension of differing subjective experiences of shared social realities. By which I mean sometimes creative modes of representation may be the only way to really give voice to the range of voices that have been given to you as a researcher, maybe working with service users to give voice as a service provider, without flattening them into one or replacing with the voice of a unified, authoritative subject.

For me, there is a particular role for the arts and humanities in research on violence against women and girls. It does something to help maintain the experiential and evocative nature of qualitative data. The role of creative representation of experiential realities is something well used by existential phenomenologists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both of whom informed my theoretical framework and who talk about the ways in which 'the world is such that it can only be expressed in 'stories', 'pointed at' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 28).

Here is the power of storytelling, something that all researchers, frontline support providers, activists and victim-survivors of violence against women are well aware of. Storytelling and the act of bearing witness.

And I can make that clearer by pointing to how I've used it in my work on women's experiences in public.

So for the women in the audience -
How often do you choose to limit your freedom in public spaces in order to feel safe? Habitually. Unconsciously.
The hidden work of being a woman in public.

You probably know what I mean when I say that women's routine experiences in public space are filled with interruption, disruption and intrusion from unknown men. Both as a reality and a possibility. Increasing and decreasing, changing across the life course, The work that we do, habitually, to minimise, avoid, subvert or manage men's stranger intrusions.

At the time of doing my study I was looking at physical public space, but this is now really coming into public consciousness in terms of online public spaces. Importance of naming here, which we touched on this morning. That the traditional framing doesn't allow us to easily make these connections, and that

there may be a need to rethink the concept of street harassment.

I'm talking about the staring, comments, following, cheer-ups, that most women experience from childhood and develop a range of habituated, embodied strategies to avoid, ignore, and resist. And I'm sure many of you know from your own experiences or those of female friends that these can range from scary to funny to a version of complimentary, are sometimes just completely bizarre, and are often dismissed as nothing really happened. But many men are unaware of this range, and struggle to understand the impact – why is cheer up such a horrific thing to have said to you? Isn't a stranger saying good morning beautiful a nice thing to say? Aren't we all too atomized already?

So in my work I needed an analytic tool that would facilitate analysis of the connections and commonality between accounts, without collapsing the ways in which women experience men's violence differently based on social positions and personal histories.

I needed what Jan Jordan has called, a tool, able to: 'elucidate patterns and uniformities in the women's responses, while striving to protect more unique experiences from disappearing in the analysis' (2005: 539).

Given the sheer bizarreness of some men's intrusions (being barked at for example, or having a car slow down and a man yell BOO), I wanted to find a method of data representation whereby the breadth of the continuum of men's intrusion would be evident, a way of capturing the phenomenological detail of intrusion for my participants.

And I have used two different creative forms to achieve these aims so far, one is the creation of a poetic transcript, and the other is working with an all woman theatre company, Dollseye Theatre, to have my research inform the creation of a piece of theatre – called Might Never Happen, which did a limited run in May and is looking to move into a central venue as well as develop work for universities.

Creative transcript

Working with the principles of poetic transcription and creative representation, I constructed a poem solely from the words of 50 female participants. Sentences are taken directly as spoken within the research interviews, with every individual intrusive practice from men reported by participants interlaced with each mention made by women of their habitual embodied responses. In order to capture men's stranger intrusion as a shared social reality for women, the list of both particular encounters and general responses was then randomised, and I constructed the poem through interlacing men's practices with women's responses, with only the final two sentences ordered by design.

So this resulted in stanzas
such as:

I had one guy who mimicked a blowjob from the car window one time.
If you don't put make up on you can become quite invisible.
Someone did just literally stop and say "oi love you should be on
Weightwatchers".
I don't really like being in crowded places just in case.
He got out his penis and he was trying to make me touch it.
It wears you down in the end.

The choice to use women's general responses over particular responses to individual instances was in part determined by participants themselves, many of whom were unable to remember specific reactions during the conversations. This choice however revealed patterns that may have been lost in other forms of analysis, in particular participants' habitual embodied responses to the possibility of intrusion.

The resulting piece offered a way to produce a 'shared experience between research, audience, and participant', mirroring in the reader's emotional response, aspects of the lived experience itself. The whole piece runs about 20 pages and is repetitive, shocking, mundane, intrusive all at the same time. Replicating the feelings of many of my participants about being a woman in public

Might Never Happen.

This is something I aimed to develop in working with Dollseye Theatre. I wanted to get across how 'street harassment' *feels* because so often we get tied up in objective definitions or debates about law. Statistics and testimony say so much, but there's something often left unacknowledged. This is part of what I hoped to capture for the stage.

All those times when we've thought maybe...

Maybe we'll just sit over here, get on the bus, do a quick scan, and we choose the seat closest to women, or closest to the driver, or catch the next train, just to be safe. Or maybe we've pulled out our phone to avoid being stared at, called someone to avoid being spoken to, stop when we get off the bus, not sure if he's following just wait back to see. Cheer up love it might never happen. He might not be following you, touching you, staring at you. But it feels like he is. Or he could. It feels like the last time he did, the last time the last 'he' did.

What is the right amount of panic?

Myself and a colleague, Dr Maria Garner who works on critical masculinities and VAWG, sent through summaries of our data, key themes and parts of transcripts, to the Director who I knew previously, as well as one of the Actors, through their involvement with my Rape Crisis Centre. So it's important to note there was already a trust there and a knowledge of their understanding of forms of sexual violence. The company then worked with the data over a period of 2-3 months and created a play comprised of seven short vignettes each depicting a different aspect or viewpoint on the issue. Maria and I

consulted across the whole process So these ranged from a monologue where a woman spoke about how it really isn't an issue, that feminism should be more concerned with equal pay or parliamentary representation, to a scene that depicts sexual assault in a nightclub, and a powerful representation of one of the concepts of rape as a fortunate lack (that is how women in my research referred to 'I'm lucky' when talking about how they hadn't been raped).

The play was really successful, with 4 and 5 star reviews from theatre critics who totally weren't versed in feminism, research or VAWG and seemed to really get some of my key research concepts. And I think parts of it really did work in terms of mirroring that emotional reaction. Some examples of audience reaction were recorded on press night.

However it was interesting in terms of theatre critics responses and that these sometimes missed really crucial points that the company had thought were well made, but (interestingly) both myself and Maria had been concerned about – things like attributing sexual assault to miscommunication, or interpreting a piece that was intended to convey the difference between women and men's realities as 'it happens to men too'. So there's something there about the power of myths, and the desire to find an excuse to degender the issue.

There were also limitations in terms of the embodied characteristics of the theatre company (4 white, educated women) and how this restricted the representation of racialised sexual harassment – something covered particularly well in recent video by Imkaan's young women team, Purple Drum, and the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW). Most interesting for me is how this absence of the experiences of black women, even though named within the play itself, was not picked up on by any of the theatre critics - and my learning through this in terms of my role in perpetuating a silence, a loss, the gaps in whose voices are represented.

So I want to show that video now, some of you may have seen it but from my recent move from the women's sector to the academy I feel like there's spaces for intervention in terms of whose voices are given legitimacy in terms of age, class and gender.

Here the power of voice - these young women clearly articulate in 5 minutes what it took me 4 years and 80,000 to say - that women live a tension between their safety and their freedom where to increase one they need to reduce the other.

Additional Resources

'You Need to Find a Version of the World You Can Be In': Experiencing the Continuum of Men's Intrusive Practices (poetic transcript)

Dollseye Theatre

Trailer 'Might Never Happen'

Audience Response 'Might Never Happen'