Arts-Based Engagement Ethnography: An Approach for Making Research Engaging and Knowledge Transferable When Working With Harder-to-Reach Communities

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Abstract
In social science research, epistemological assumptions regarding what constitutes valid research fall into two main areas of inquiry—qualitative and quantitative. Within a qualitative paradigm, eliciting a close and often intimate exploration of phenomenon from a text-based or verbal approach is privileged, and in a quantitative paradigm, obtaining a systematic, large population survey or questionnaire approach is prioritized. Although the two are not mutually exclusive, with the development of each, the visual and the kinesthetic aspects have both largely been lost. This article proposes an arts-based engagement ethnography (ABEE) as a means of reclaiming these visual and kinesthetic aspects in order to engage in culturally sensitive research with underrepresented communities. To this end, this article outlines some of the limitations of current research and explores how cultural probes (a set of simple items given to participants to help them document their experiences) can be used to enter qualitative research from a different epistemological vantage point. Moreover, this article discusses the use of qualitative interviews and focus groups in ABBE and the manner in which this methodology allows for unique knowledge mobilization possibilities. It highlights how these are built into the research design, and how this is an important part of the approach’s ability to engage harder-to-reach communities.

Keywords
arts-based methods, ethnomethodology, methods in qualitative inquiry, social justice, community-based research

The traditional social sciences such as anthropology and psychology often struggle to engage with groups, such as newcomer communities in Western cities, who for reasons such as limited linguistic or cultural competency in the host country’s culture may prove refractory to engagement through traditional methods such as interviews or ethnographic observation. An increasing academic and policy focus on understanding and addressing the needs of such “harder-to-reach” groups is driving social scientists to reflect on methodological approaches (Flanagan & Hancock, 2010). This article proposes one such new methodological approach—arts-based engagement ethnography (ABEE)—designed to support researchers who seek to engage more fully and robustly with their participants in order to attain a deeper understanding of participants’ social lives and cultural practices and the context and complexity of their experiences. Throughout, this article highlights the responsiveness of the ABBE methodology, in its various phases, to a number of key challenges that face researchers engaging with harder-to-reach communities and individuals and to improve the success and translation of that engagement into knowledge sharing.

ABBE is “arts based” in that it asks participants to express ideas, perceptions, views, and experiences in ways and through channels that go beyond the privileged use of denotative language characteristic of most traditional social science methodologies. It uses imaginative and engaging techniques based on the use of a selected set of simple items to elicit and record participants’ creative responses to their experience, such as cameras, maps, journals, postcards and sketchbooks,

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collectively referred to as cultural probes. The artifacts produced through cultural probes require a rethinking of the way in which researchers engage with participants, which then informs the use of focus group and individual interviews that complete the ABEE research process. The artifacts created by participants prompt researchers to give priority to the participants’ own hierarchy(ies) of importance in terms of what Kitzinger (1994) has called “their language and concepts, their frameworks for understanding the world” (p. 108).

In discussing cultural probes, semistructured individual interviews, and focus groups—the pillars of ABEE—this article seeks to fulfill three objectives: first, to locate cultural probes epistemologically as research tools that encourage playfulness, imagination, and information gathering; second, to explain why cultural probes as exploratory tools can, and perhaps should, be applied in social science research with harder-to-reach groups; and third, to highlight the role that interviews, and especially focus groups, has in eliciting a range of responses within ABEE. Overall, the intention is to demonstrate how an ABEE approach can lead to a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and perceptions of research participants.

ABEE can be epistemologically located within a broad understanding of the work of Bhabha (1994) for whom the imperative when working with nondominant, harder-to-reach communities lies in our capacity to meet them in a neutral space. ABEE offers a research approach that is specifically directed at facilitating research that accounts for the experiences and narratives of multiculturalism and diversity. This is important especially when conducting research with underrepresented and harder-to-reach communities and individuals, a situation in which researchers often encounter difficulties in accounting for differences in cultural codes. “Newcomers,” that is, immigrants and refugees who have recently arrived in Western countries, are referred to in this article as an example of a broad type of harder-to-reach community that an ABEE approach to research can support.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the limitations in current research practices with newcomers, highlighting how awareness of cultural codes can inform how research is approached so as to avoid some of the pitfalls that typically occur when research takes place with groups that may have been historically hard to reach. The second section explores how cultural probes offer an alternative way of researching with hard-to-reach groups. It does this by presenting some background information regarding how cultural probes were first used and describes examples of how the probes approach has since been applied and the possibilities these have for future research. The third section explores the role of the focus group in this methodology, highlighting the collective, additive nature of designing planned discussion groups (O’Reilly, 2012) based on the information previously collected through the probes and subsequent individual interviews. The final section highlights the unique characteristic of ABEE: namely its focus on research data creation and in turn its capacity for traction and accessibility in the public sphere.

### Limitations in Current Research With Harder-to-Reach Communities

There is much discussion in the literature (Bonevski et al., 2014) highlighting the challenges that researchers and harder-to-reach communities face with respect to both conducting and participating in research (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Green, Kassan, Russell-Mayhew, & Goopy, 2018; Kassan et al., 2018; Valerio et al., 2016). Not only can harder-to-reach community members be difficult to engage and even recruit but there is also the difficulty inherent in traditional approaches to research that are dependent on the privilege of the (racially and gendered) dominant group. Combined, these challenges make it difficult for researchers to engage these communities and individuals in studies.

Literature on newcomer research, for example, indicates that the challenges of engagement stem largely from the researcher (often White) and their associated privilege. Traditional approaches to research tend to privilege the researcher over the research participant. Methods often encourage, albeit implicitly, nonreflexive tools for research. For example, the traditional structured interview leaves little room for a participant to tell the story they want told; a survey leaves little room (even with qualitative questions) for the elicitation of the unknown or unanticipated. In addition, matters of privilege, personal status, or identity are rarely explored as a matter of course (Green et al., 2018; Helms, Henze, Mascher, & Satiani, 2006; Kassan et al., 2018; Spanierman & Soble, 2010). Research has thus tended to be conducted on rather than with harder-to-reach communities and individuals. Understanding, when sought, is often problem focused, for example, often targeting trauma and/or deficits in health, education, or employment. Unfortunately, from time to time, this focus on problems has played into the practice of positioning diversity as containment, thus obscuring knowledge and understanding of culture from the point of view of the everyday experiences of individuals or communities themselves. In short, diversity becomes located and thus understood either from within the framework of the dominant group or via between-group comparisons. Consequently, research faces the risk of becoming a source for perpetuating bias against harder-to-reach communities or creating community hierarchy.

Moreover, the term “newcomer” itself may reflect a tendency of social research to obscure aspects of diversity within the communities, including aspects such as age, gender, race, social or economic class, and education. The “newcomer” tag, for example, encompasses individuals who are vastly different in terms of premigration conditions, the degree of voluntariness in coming to the new country, time spent in transit countries or holding camps, as well as the economic, social, and political conditions that impact the transition and integration to the destination country. Difficulties associated with a homogenous rendering of the term “newcomer” can seem both obvious and avoidable. However, the oversimplification and ready use of this term, as it influences our social and cultural response to this category of community and directly shapes research, is not a
priori. Indeed, we can see a similar situation in the development of the terms “cultural diversity” and “multiculturalism” as Bhabha in Rutherford (1990) posits:

…the idea that cultures are diverse and that in some sense the diversity of cultures is a good and positive thing and ought to be encouraged, has been known for a long time. It is commonplace of plural democratic societies to say that they can encourage and accommodate cultural diversity. In fact the sign of the “cultured” or the “civilised” attitude is the ability to appreciate cultures in a kind of musée imaginaire; as though one should be able to collect and appreciate them. Western connoisseurship is the capacity to understand and locate cultures in a universal time-frame that acknowledges their various historical and social contexts only eventually to transcend them and render them transparent . . . Multiculturalism represent[s] an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, administering a consensus based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity . . .... (pp. 207–209)

It is therefore important to make space for social narratives that reflect the politics and experiences of such harder-to-reach communities. The inherent difficulties in conducting research with harder-to-reach communities, such as newcomers, cannot be overstated. Ethical engagement calls for reflection on questions of process as well as conceptualization. Considerations of assumptions held, differences confronted in cultural codes, and the experiences of otherness need to underpin design and approach. It is not enough to think solely of culture as a singular whole nor as situated simply by objects or boarders. Culture refers to the range of meaningful social practices: “a process, a set of practices” (Hall, 1997, p. 2). Research with newcomers, as with other harder-to-reach communities, often starts from a point of cultural diversity that assumes, and is reliant upon, a normative position. Here, otherness is constructed as valuable when considered and located in a relational way within the dominant normative framework. To counter this limitation, viewing culture as a process and not a thing highlights the particular way of perceiving and not the particular thing that is perceived. Researchers need not simply to be aware of cultural diversity but to actively think, plan, and build a space for this diversity to have a voice within their work.

ABEE posits through its design the need for the researcher to place oneself in “the position of liminality” (Bhabha, 1994). In so doing, researchers place awareness of cultural codes as bound up with cultural perceptions at the forefront of their research practice. By privileging the creative work of research participants, particularly through the cultural probes that launch and anchor the entire ABEE research process, ABEE encourage researchers to meet cultural difference outside of the dominant framework. In using ABEE, researchers are asked to have an active awareness of how they define and locate culture: The particular way of perceiving and not the particular thing that is perceived. Placing such awareness at the center of the research design, and having it drive the way interactions occur within research, represents the key innovation of ABEE in relation to traditional research practices that encourage acknowledgment of, rather than account for through design, insider–outsider relationships.

In approaching research with harder-to-reach communities such as newcomers, ABEE seeks to shift thinking beyond the dominant constructs of the creation and the subsequent containment of cultural diversity. Rather, ABEE offers a method that acknowledges otherness and deliberately encourages the development of research data collection that respects culture within different populations and seeks to partner with participants to find ways to best understand their experiences. For example, as discussed below, focus group and individual interviews with participants are shaped in ABEE by the images, narratives, and issues raised by participants themselves through their creative work elicited through the cultural probes. The richness and variation of culture that this approach acknowledges and actively embraces in turn supports harder-to-reach communities, to give voice to their experiences of various phenomena. Essentially, this shifts research from being about communities to research that seeks to respectfully and ethically engage partnership and participation with and for communities. Against this background, we invite readers to consider the use of ABEE as a promising method for research with harder-to-reach groups, in a way that foregrounds culture as indicative of knowledge and experience.

ABEE: Cultural Probes

As both a method for the collection of data and a creative and collaborative way to intentionally involve participants and researchers in the process and outcomes, ABEE is primarily concerned with finding a way to locate both the researcher and the research participant in the realm of understanding and knowing otherness and the experience of this within a dominant culture replete with disparate cultural codes. Unlike methodologies that grant the researcher an “authoritative voice,” ABEE’s use of cultural probes and focus groups paves the way for researchers to create data from multiple voices via multiple mediums. Visual artifacts such as photographs, videos, sketches, or drawings are important facilitators of the data creation as they offer a familiar, accessible, understood way of accessing a sensorial awareness of everyday life. In this way, ABEE captures not only what is said but also what is done: the interactions, body language, and the uses of place and space.

The use of creative, arts-based methods of inquiry has been shown to help newcomers express otherness by eliciting representations of abstract concepts such as identity and agency (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014). Such nontraditional approaches to research act also to support participants as well as researchers to construct meaning around experiences such as migration and resettlement (Rousseau & Heusch, 2000; Rousseau, Lacroix, Sign, & Benoit, 2005). Further, the opportunity within ABEE for participants to direct their engagement and express their experiences in visual, playful, imaginative, and artistic ways means that not only are harder-to-reach or disenfranchised groups more able to engage in meaningful conversations...
(Gause & Coholic, 2010) but also there is creation of a space that, intentionally and actively, seeks to encourage the generation of new insights and new possibilities for understanding (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, & Walker 2004; Gaver, Dunne, & Pacenti, 1999; Kassan et al., 2018; Wright & McCarthy, 2005).

The visual, with its importance as a means of shifting beyond language as a means of expression and a route to understanding, sits at the heart of ABEE. The power of the researcher over the researched is well-documented in traditional language-centric qualitative research and even where acknowledged it continues to locate the power relationship in favor of the researcher (and thus the academy) over the participant. Visual research methodologies open pathways to overcome this bias. One of the most effective ways that researchers can shift beyond traditional power relationships in research is to shift their approach to research beyond language. For example, visual ethnography as shown in the work of Pink (2013) and MacDougall (2005), and photovoice practices (Wang & Burris, 1997), extends the practice of studying the social and cultural practices of groups and individuals by adding a visual element.

In the case of visual ethnography, the researcher documents with photographs or illustrations (see, e.g., Pink, 2013) or through the creation of an ethnographic film (e.g., MacDougall, 2005). By contrast, in photovoice, the researcher seeks an even greater emphasis on the role of the participant by emphasizing the role of the participant in the generation of photography as the main source of data. These approaches each offer well-known examples of the use of the visual in research and contribute to making understanding accessible and promoting a breakdown of traditional insider–outsider relationships. However, these visual ethnographical approaches continue to rely on some key predetermined assumptions: that the researcher’s eye will capture the experience of the participants (visual ethnography) or that photography is the medium that best works for all participants when “telling their story” (photovoice).

ABBE embraces the advantages of these methods in exploring culture, understanding the social and cultural meanings of a phenomenon, gaining a deeper understanding of the culture and experiences of individuals, and opening up the possibilities of direct dialogue with others (Creswell, 2013; Jackson, 1996; Pettigrew, 2000). However, ABEE seeks to take this even further by going beyond the visual to the imaginative, the empathetic, the playful, and the informative qualities often associated with design rather than social science or health research. These principles have been adopted, adapted, and woven throughout ABEE’s approach to research. This emphasis on imagination and playfulfulness is explicitly made possible through the use of the cultural probes as the foundational means of data collection.

Cultural probes first came to light within the design world (Gaver et al., 1999). By the late 1990s, Gaver and colleagues had established a reputation for their use through studies conducted by an artist–designer–researcher team that sought to investigate the cultural and personal aspects of people’s lives in three distinct communities across three countries (Italy, Norway, and the Netherlands; Gaver, 2001; Gaver et al., 1999). Perhaps most telling and most interesting about this study was that it had started out with the more traditional tools of research—the survey and the questionnaire. However, as this project was seeking insights to support the design and development of a practical solution to everyday issues confronting these groups, Gaver and colleagues found that in order to design for these people, statistical facts were not enough. The need for empathic understanding underpinned the use of the probes:

The probes were part of a strategy of pursuing experimental design in a responsive way. They address a common dilemma in developing projects for unfamiliar groups. Understanding the local cultures was necessary so that our designs wouldn’t seem irrelevant or arrogant, but we didn’t want the groups to constraining our designs unduly by focusing on needs or desires they already understood. We wanted to lead a discussion with the groups toward unexpected ideas, but we didn’t want to dominate it. (Gaver et al., 1999, p. 22, our emphasis)

In an almost parallel approach to research, Goopy and Lloyd (2006) in the late 1990s and early 2000s had begun to use similar techniques to elicit an empathic engagement described as “understanding the human condition.” In both instances, the cultural probing and elicitation of cultural artifacts took on an empathic form. As Goopy and Lloyd argue:

[This methodology] acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in humans studying humans and embraces inter-disciplinarity... the subjective measure of a person’s wellbeing, [quality of life] QOL has no objective reality that stands independent of its creator and therefore does not lend itself to be easily understood through scientific-realist paradigms... To study quality of life is to study the subjective experience of well-being and destiny. How to capture, understand and make sense of this subjective experience, this quality of life, was the starting point... (pp. 33, 34)

Used to elicit subjectivity, probes, through the interactive and creative means, can include, but are not limited to, cameras, maps, diaries, sketchbooks, videos, smartphones, postcards, and time lines. The use of probes encourages both documentation and creativity. As participants are asked to use familiar “tools” in unusual ways, the probes work to encourage participants to respond to and reflect on certain everyday practices and experiences in new and unexpected ways. Probes in this way give participants scope beyond the direction of the researcher, yet the researcher can still give guidance and request the recording of particular activities, or even temporal moments, depending on both the participants and the intent of the project.

The guidance given by the researcher is less about prescription and more about encouraging individuals to capture any and all the elements that impact on, direct, or determine their experience of a given phenomenon. Over time, these largely design-oriented tools have been refined and used as not only a credible and effective but also an empowering method for researching...
with diverse and hard-to-reach individuals and groups. As Goopy and Lloyd (2006) state in relation to their study with older Italian Australians:

...the research was able to assist the participant in giving birth to stories that offer insight (Goopy & Lloyd, 2005; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) into the well-being, health and QoL of both the individual and the group. In an attempt to redress what Marcus (1994) identifies as the habit of anthropology to expunge the spatial form in which the participants live their lives... It also allows the narratives of the participants to maintain their locality and spatiality as they are supported by and act to support the material culture that surrounds them. (pp. 34, 36)

Cultural probes used in ABEE are adapted from the work of Gaver et al.’s (1999) original design data gathering intent and Goopy and Lloyds’s (2006) earlier use of probes (photography, diaries, and objects) to explore the human condition in relation to well-being and quality of life. In ABEE, they have been purposefully repurposed to invite participants to be, and to act, as agents. As agents, participants are given the space, the permission, and the opportunity to reflect on and verbalize their experiences, feelings, and attitudes as well as to locate and contextualize their experiences. They are particularly encouraged to visualize their identity as manifest through experiences, action(s), and context(s).

Cultural probes require considerable time and effort in their design. Researchers need to be actively and attentively involved in the design of any cultural probe tools: probes must meet the needs of the research, the age and interests of the participants, and the funds available. In short, they need to be responsive to all the needs of the project’s participants. ABEE cultural probes need to be sufficiently interesting to stimulate the participant to think about the questions/prompts/activities being asked of them; to think in ways that are a little “outside of the box”; challenge them enough to engage, but not so much as to leave them feeling “out of their depth”; encourage their imagination; and support them to feel enabled.

The most important element in the cultural probe is the representation of experience through the visual. This may include, though is not limited to, photographs, drawings, sketches, and objects: “Pictures provide orientation for our everyday practice on the quite elementary levels of understanding, learning, socialization and human development” (Bohn-sack, 2008, para. 8). By contrast, in research that relies on structured or semistructured interviews as the main data collection method, there is constant toing and froing between the researcher and the participant, and the skilled interviewer is able to bring the focus back when it deviates from the topic at hand; in the survey or questionnaire, there are a finite number of questions and possible responses. In the probe, it is difficult to control for this response. However, this is not a weakness but rather a strength, as it affords the potential for participants to tell the story that is important to them, stimulating responses to questions or ideas posed in ways that a traditional technique may not. As Goopy and Lloyd (2006) argue:

Central to this... is the recognition that any ethnography is a combination of meanings attributed to the phenomena under study by all involved in the study, participants as well as researchers. [It]... is also built on the premise that words are not the only medium through which knowledge can be transmitted. (p. 34)

ABEE draws on diverse discipline areas. In so doing, ABBE creates a research environment that encourages multiple opportunities for the elicitation of rich, multilayered data in a relatively short time. ABEE brings together elements from photojournalism, design, and visual ethnography. It encourages the exploration of phenomena through a lens that continues to value the spoken and written word but also values the visual world (photography, drawing, film, etc.), as well as elements of play, creativity, and imagination. ABBE, in this way, responds to what Dewey (1934 cited in Wright & McCarthy, 2005) identified as scientific research’s limitation in addressing and understanding the human condition:

The problem lies, according to Dewey, in the fact that the natural sciences are backward looking in as much as they seek to describe the way the world is, whereas the problem is to create an understanding of the way we might want the world to be. So instead of objective description it is necessary to place creative imagination and ways of seeing at the centre of our approach. (pp. 12, 13)

Collecting data in this way allows for an in-depth, multilayered, contextual understanding of culture and otherness. The playfulness and imaginative elements contribute to ABEE’s ability for knowledge to be expressed in ways that make sense to the participant. Both the researcher and the research participant are afforded the opportunity to move beyond a traditional insider–outsider relationship. ABEE is thus designed to maximize the full engagement of participants in the research process and yield rich, often unanticipated, data. The tools of ABEE become the conduit for expressing culture as experienced and thereby giving us a way to capture insights into participants’ worlds which, in turn, can assist us to create from these, with the added benefit of Phase 2 (interviews/focus group interviews), an understanding of “the way we might want the world to be.”

Against this backdrop, the visual as documentary becomes central to ABEE. The question being explored through cultural artifacts (often visual), as produced via the cultural probes, is not solely concerned with what cultural or social phenomena are represented but importantly why and how they are produced. In other words, context is as important as content. This interest allows the ABEE approach to support the establishment of a symbiotic relationship for understanding between the what, the how, and the why, of a participant’s experience. As Knowles (2006) states, “what we see and how we see it is intricately connected with the forms of social organization within which we are all... located and with which we have a matrix of
connections’ (p. 512). In this way, the researcher and the participant are given access to understand and consider what might be—or as Dewey might say “what we want the world to be.”

The concept of habitus is thus useful in understanding the value of cultural probes and the importance of their design. As Bourdieu (1990) states:

... [habitus is composed of] systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (p. 53)

Habitus consists of deeply internalized dispositions, schemata, and forms of know-how and competence—both mental and corporeal. All of these are acquired by an individual through their socialization: their experiences of social interactions, processes of imitation, repetition, role-play, and participation. In this way, habitus gives structure to structures and generates perceptions, expectations, and practices that correspond to the structuring properties of socialization (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus is formed by different amounts and types of capital (social, economic, cultural, symbolic) and generates action in structured social contexts. These are the competitive arenas for struggle over the various forms of capital.

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus supports the importance of attention to detail in the preparation of cultural probes within ABEE. The design of cultural probes is central to the technique. In order for them to “probe deeply,” they must allow for the “not yet thought of.” This feature acknowledges that the questions researchers ask are bound by their own knowledge and therefore their own biases. The design of the probe actively seeks to set aside some space for these limitations to be transcended. In this sense, the probes give us access to the liminality of our participants’ experience. ABEE probes probe in ways that the interview cannot, they open space for otherness to be. Understanding cultural difference in this way takes it beyond desire to locate it within a dominant framework. It sets up the opportunity for reflexivity and the room to explore difference from a strength-based position. In this way, as Kassan et al. (2018) have suggested, an ABEE approach is well placed to support research with newcomers and harder-to-reach communities and individuals.

ABEE: Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

While cultural probes and the artifacts they produce are foundational to the research process in ABEE, the qualitative interview continues to have an important and deliberate role in the research process. Specifically, devised based on the artifacts that arise from the participants’ engagement with the cultural probes, the interviews open dialogue within the third space. The central place of the visual (photographs, drawings, mappings, etc.) and the supportive role of personal monologue (journals, poetry, etc.) in the creation of artifacts have a direct influence on how interviews are conceptualized. Interest in what, how, and why participants produce their artifacts, in direct relation to the overarching research question, directs the development and advancement of the research interview type (individual/focus group) and protocol. In short, this means that the emic nature of this approach renders the establishment of predetermined/routinized interview protocols antithetic.

This design challenges the place of dominant culture and discourages what Bhabha (in Rutherford, 1990, p. 208) refers to as “Western connoisseurship.” As the researcher moves to interview, liminality is a key. The discomfort of the unknown, the positioning of otherness that it offers, provides the opportunity for the researcher to acknowledge their privilege and actively locate their bias in search of their own spirit of alterity. In turn, this enables an exploration of cultural difference and otherness from the perspective of both the researcher and the participant.

When focus groups are added to the equation, ABEE becomes a means of eliciting the individual as well as the collective experience. Focus groups are a well-established means of collecting qualitative data, which can be traced back to the 1940s, when the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University investigated post–World War II propaganda within the media (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Echoing the foundation work of Robert Merton, focus groups have been widely used across educational research to assess client needs and develop programs (Nabors, Ramos, & Weist, 2001) as well as in education research to evaluate the effectiveness of after-school programs for youth who may have been systemically disadvantaged (Hall, Williams, & Daniels, 2011). Moreover, according to Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, focus group work is an effective means of researching sensitive topics and groups that may be vulnerable groups.

As Green, Kassan, Russell-Mayhew, and Goopy (2018) discuss, one-on-one interviews, while a standard tool of qualitative data, are culturally bound in their inception to Western ways of knowing. By contrast, when working with groups that have traditionally been underrepresented in the literature, such as newcomer communities, Madriz (1998) has proposed that the focus group can offer a way for participants to express their experiences in a nonthreatening, collective environment. The dual modalities of data collection offered by ABEE, commencing with the specifically designed cultural probes, facilitate this type of engagement further. The ABEE-phased process allows for interviews to be driven by the participants’ artifacts (within the context of the study question), which, in turn, within the focus group support different points of connection with participants as well as multiple opportunities to share experiences.

A particular variant of the focus group known as the “planned discussion group,” which is widely used in ethnographic research (O’Reilly, 2012), informs the way in which focus groups are conducted within the ABEE method. The additional layers and elements that exist in the ABEE focus group are well supported by planned discussion groups. As a
form of focus group, the planned discussion group has most of the characteristics of traditional focus groups except that participants are “likely to be a naturally occurring group” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 135) rather than a group of strangers brought together to explore a particular topic. This is central to ABEE’s intent and addresses some of the limitations that focus groups can have when applied to newcomer communities (see Green et al., 2018). Participants in ABEE focus groups, such as members of newcomer communities who are often known to each other, are more likely to feel connected and interact more comfortably, as they share a sense of identity around their social location in their host country.

In this methodology, focus groups are carefully planned around the artifacts that participants have produced and the discussion interviews that researchers have with individuals as they seek clarity on what the participant has produced. Thus, each project will have its own combination of focus groups, which vary in length, numbers, and topic areas. In this way, there is a direct line between the choice of cultural probes and their instructions to participants, the design of the interview protocol for the individual qualitative interviews, and the planning of focus groups. When considering groups that may be hard to reach, ABEE allows for flexibility and individuation with respect to the methodological design.

Engagement Ethnography and the Public Mobilization of Knowledge

ABEE has developed over time in response to a need to find more actively engaging and meaningful ways to research with harder-to-reach communities while also upholding the epistemological values of acknowledging the complexity of the human condition (Goopy, 2015a, 2015b; Goopy & Howard, 2008/2012; Goopy & Kassan, 2016; Goopy & Lloyd, 2006; Goopy, Lloyd, & Blakely, 2007/2010; Goopy & Paraschuk, 2016; Goopy & Venturato, 2012; Kassan et al., 2018). Goopy and Lloyd (2006) first outlined a vision for an ABEE-style approach in research bringing together research methods from ethnography with the documentary techniques of photojournalism. Examples of this approach’s commitment to making research a process that actively involves participants and their participation in creation, as well as a pathway to research translation that is highly accessible, can be seen in, for example, Goopy, Lloyd, & Blakely (2007/2010); Goopy and Howard (2008/2012); Goopy and Paraschuk (2016); Goopy et al. (2018b).

Gaver (2001) and Hemings, Clarke, Rouncefield, Crabtree, and Rodden (2002) also demonstrated similar intent with their design research in the early 2000s. Here, they explored how probes, and the artifacts they produce, can be used to create interaction among groups of people. When adapted to social and cultural research, these interactions, as we have seen above, can be between researcher and participant, participants themselves, and as an end point of knowledge mobilization, these are realized in even broader engagements via interaction between and within diverse groups from the general public, policy makers, researchers, teachers, and community organizations (Goopy et al., 2018a, 2018b; Goopy et al., 2007/2010; Goopy & Lloyd, 2006; Goopy & Kassan, 2016; Kassan et al., 2018).

The desire to engage a broad audience through the process of knowledge mobilization of findings is built into the research design itself when probes are used. While it is possible for the data collected via cultural probes to remain only in the realm of “data,” the artifactual nature and visual presence of the artifacts lend the findings of research conducted in this way to creativity on dissemination and the sharing of knowledge gained. The way in which people work with the probes not only offers insights into the “what” of a phenomenon but also the “how.” Like the visual research technique of photographic documentary, with a focus on environmental portraiture (Goopy and Lloyd, 2006; Knowles, 2006; Leavy, 2014), the artifacts of the cultural probes capture the social reality of the experience being studied.

In relation to the value of the use of the visual as a research device, Prosser and Loxely (2008) provide a useful overview, highlighting the benefits of visual research as follows:

> Simply put visual methods can: provide an alternative to the hegemony of a word and number based academy; slow down observation and encourage deeper and more effective reflection on all things visual and visualisable; and with it enhance our understanding of sensory embodiment and communication, and hence reflect more fully the diversity of human experience. (p. 4)

This ability of the visual and visualizable to “enhance our understanding of sensory embodiment and communication, and hence reflect more fully the diversity of human experience” becomes ever more important when we consider public response and opinions toward hard-to-reach groups such as newcomers. Knowledge translation and exchange are made possible through the inclusion of a visual element that can act to improve public awareness and perception of marginalized, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable groups. The ability of ABEE to make the results of the findings accessible to a broad community audience is important.

According to Lavis (2006), integral to knowledge transfer and exchange are researchers helping audiences to build capacity to use research knowledge and audiences helping researchers’ work to be more relevant: “exchange relationships can bring about a cultural shift that facilitates the ongoing use of research knowledge among decision-makers and a more decision-relevant culture among researchers” (p. 4). Knowledge users’ engagement in the knowledge translation and exchange process may vary in intensity and complexity, depending on the nature of the research as well as the knowledge user’s particular needs for information (Lavis, 2006). The ABEE method is designed to enable the researchers to collaborate with individual(s) (e.g., policy/decision makers, educators, researchers, and community members) who may use the knowledge generated through this research to make informed decisions about policies, programs, and/or practices.
The role of a transmedian (multiple modalities; not simply text) approach in order to better engage the public (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016) is directly supported by ABEE. The visual as a tool of knowledge mobilization (Abell, 2015) imbues the audience with the capacity to reflect on self and social identity and held values (Goopy, 2015a). This practice of reflective participation is not only of importance to the discovery arm of research but is also essential to the sharing of research findings if knowledge is to be broadly mobilized and if findings are to have impact within the broader community. The works of Clover and Craig (2009), Dalinksy (2000), Goopy et al. (2007/2010), Goopy (2015a, 2015b), and Goopy and Paraschuk (2016) are examples of this approach to knowledge mobilization. As Goopy & Lloyd (2006, p. 34) state:

Crucial to the dissemination of the knowledge…[is] the use of gallery-type exhibitions…. The exhibitions… allow the viewer to empathize with the experience captured in the study… alongside the context, negotiation and inter-subjectivities through which the presented knowledge was produced (Pink, 2001)…. Arguably, the richness of this ethnography is that the knowledge presented will be accessible to the “common person,” as well as the philosopher/academic.

The making of knowledge translatable for, and engaging to, a diverse audience is the final intent of ABEE. Through its multiple layers and imaginative, playful, and knowledge-seeking approach, ABEE elicits multiple insights into complex questions. Moreover, ABEE’s capacity to capture narrative, experience, and insight through visual, written, and spoken mediums means that researchers are left with rich and multi-layered findings. Such richness in data opens new possibilities for knowledge translation and exchange.

Conclusion

This article explored the manner in which even within a qualitative research paradigm, which privileges the subjective experience of participants, a challenge to the status quo is needed. It was argued that ABEE facilitates the full understanding of the perspectives of harder-to-reach communities and engages such groups in a culturally sensitive research process. In placing arts-based ethnographic techniques at the forefront of research, researchers are in a better position to connect with participants through individual qualitative interviews and focus group. Thus, ABEE allows for increased connection with and among participants, actively working toward privileging the voices that are underrepresented in the literature. Given the challenges associated with traditional research, using cultural probes to elicit participant experiences that would otherwise remain hidden and/or unexpressed allows for a paradigm shift within a paradigm shift. The direct line between cultural probes, qualitative interviews, focus groups, and knowledge mobilization leads to more in-depth, meaningful means of data collection and understanding of a particular phenomenon.

In thinking more globally about harder-to-reach communities, it is important for researchers to consider the multifaceted experiences of different groups as well as the context in which individuals live. ABEE requires a great deal of forethought and planning, in order to select the appropriate cultural probes, design the most user-responsive protocols for individual interviews and focus groups, and co-create knowledge mobilization with participants. An ABEE study that is too quick to execute will not yield textured and nuanced results and, more importantly, will not succeed in reaching and engaging communities that have not typically been part of the dominant research discourse. In essence, it is critical for researchers to adopt an epistemological stance that will allow them to move beyond traditional paradigms and inadvertently oversimplify the experiences of participants from harder-to-reach communities. Increased creation and collaboration can emerge from projects using the ABEE method, and from this, it is possible to in turn produce means of knowledge translation and exchange that are useful for all stakeholders associated with a given harder-to-reach community or group.

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Note

1. “The notion ‘hard to reach’ is a contested and ambiguous term that is commonly used within the spheres of social care and health, especially in discourse around health and social inequalities…. The ‘hard to reach’ may include drug users, people living with HIV, people from sexual minority communities, asylum seekers, refugees, people from black and ethnic minority communities, and homeless people although defining the notion of the ‘hard to reach’ is not straight forward” (Flanagan & Hancock, 2010, p. 1).

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