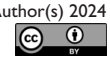
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The role of arts-based methods in supporting safe and participatory research addressing sexual violence with young people

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Abstract

Background: The use of participatory visual methods in humanities, health, education and social science research to study 'sensitive' subject matter with children and young people is growing. Such approaches have been widely – though sometimes uncritically – celebrated for contributing to safe data elicitation, promoting participant influence and strengthening research dissemination and impact. Some authors have pointed to their political contributions – challenging the traditional politics of representation and fostering critical consciousness and thinking.

Methods: This article explores these claims, reflecting on a study using creative and participatory methods to explore the concept of 'resistance' among young people affected by sexual violence. It begins by outlining the background, rationale and use of creative methods in the project, moving from plans to utilise 'Photovoice' methods to a more diverse and responsive set of creative methods.

Findings: The paper presents evidence for the contribution of such methods to creating safety and fostering participation while developing new conceptual thinking among researchers and participants.

Conclusion: In this project, the success of creative methods is rooted in the dynamics of what we term *spaciousness* and *playfulness* which support dialogical practice. These dynamics are critical to enabling a safe participatory culture that bridges divides between stakeholders of different status, identity and ownership.

Keywords

Art-based research, participatory research, resistance, sexual violence, young people

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Introduction

Imagining Resistance was a multi-disciplinary 3-year participatory photography and visual methods project exploring how young people in England (aged 13–25 years) who have experienced sexual violence and exploitation engage in acts of resistance. It sought to consider two questions:

- What does resistance look like and mean to young people affected by sexual abuse and exploitation?
- How might participatory visual methods help young people represent and understand their own experience of resistance and how might the use of these methods help change professional practice and shape the discourses surrounding sexual exploitation and violence?

This article focuses on the latter question – considering how creative participatory methods can surface new knowledge and the dynamics through which they operate within research. We start by contextualising our approach before exploring learning from the process.

'Imperfect victims' and manifestations of resistance

UK-based health, education and welfare responses to young people impacted by, or considered 'at risk of', sexual violence have historically tended towards competing dynamics of paternalism or victim blaming (Hallett, 2016). This reflects well-documented tensions between young people's coexisting victimhood and agency in the aftermath of sexual violence (Beckett, 2019). In practice, this tension manifests where either professional responses reflect a 'rescue' imperative negating young people's own desire for agency and influence (Warrington and Brodie, 2018) or, alternatively, when young people who do not adequately 'perform' the anticipated role of 'victim' are constructed as 'imperfect victims', less deserving of support than others or with poorly recognised needs and vulnerabilities (Beckett, 2019; Hallett, 2016).

Relatedly, young people's actions to resist diverse forms of harm (whether interpersonal or institutional) may be misrecognised and framed as irrational and obstructive, or pathologised as maladaptive. Young people's agency is thus often framed as a problem rather than a resource (Munford and Sanders, 2017). Although the language of resistance is widely used within these contexts, resistance is often considered in solely negative terms (as in 'resistant to accepting help').

At the outset of the project, we contended that young people's acts of resistance are rarely seen as indicators of health (Wade, 1997), strength and resourcefulness (Munford and Sanders, 2017). Instead, they are misunderstood and misrecognised. This misrecognition may underpin the pervasive disjuncture between how services and policy conceive of the needs of young people who experience sexual violence and how young people frame their own needs. Thus, when young people fail to comply with health, education or safeguarding services designed to support them, assumptions often focus on the failure of young people to engage rather than considering the possibility that services may be ill suited to meet their needs (Pearce, 2009). A central concern of the Imagining Resistance project was therefore reconsidering young people's needs by exploring the concept of resistance and disrupting binary notions of victimhood and agency, engagement and resistance.

Rationale for a focus on resistance

While recognising that definitions vary (Seymour, 2006), we draw here on Wade's (1997) conceptualisation of resistance in the context of interpersonal violence as 'attempts to expose, withstand,

repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression or the conditions that make such acts possible' (p. 25). The Imagining Resistance project was interested in both explicit acts of defiance and small 'everyday acts of resistance' that may be subtle, safe, but meaningful and effective (Scott, 1989: 34), including acts which typically fly under the radar of social scientists such as 'foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance' (p. 34). As well, we also recognise that such everyday acts of resistance may be interwoven with acquiescence and accommodation (Ahern, 2002).

Applying these concepts to young people impacted by abuse enabled the project to chart new ground. Consideration of resistance as a positive or strengths-based quality is underexplored both broadly within psycho-social research with youth (Severinsson and Markström, 2015; Shaw, 2013) and in relation to those impacted by sexual violence (Kelly, 1988). Bracke (2020: 70) suggests that 'resistance as a way of relating to social conditions of hardship and injustice has suffered from a loss of purchase in the recent decades . . . resilience has indeed come to occupy, at least partially, that vacant place'. Bracke posits that a focus on resilience provides a socialising imperative for a neoliberal agenda focusing on questions about how individuals *cope* in contexts of adversity (changing of self to adapt to circumstance), rather than how individuals *challenge* or fight back against contexts of adversity (changing of circumstance). Crucially, acts of resistance do not tolerate or acquiesce with sources of adversity or harm, and thus aim to neither accommodate nor sustain that harm – pushing back against, rather than bouncing back from. These developing theoretical understandings have relevance for the real, lived experiences of abused and marginalised young people yet the concept of resistance remains complex and may be unfamiliar or inaccessible to young people themselves.

Rationale for participatory creative methods

Ethical considerations informed how to manage risks associated with engaging young people affected by sexual trauma in discursive spaces focussed on responding to abuse (Ellis et al., 2023). Literature suggests that the dynamics of visual and creative methods can support participant safety when addressing sensitive subject matter (Cody, 2020). This is largely understood as a consequence of their focus on supporting participant choice, and less direct forms of questioning which enable the possibility of distance from traumatic experiences that may be the focus of the research (Ellis et al., 2023). Furthermore, the use of arts-based methods in this context links with increasing recognition and use of arts in therapeutic practices supporting self-expression, emotional connection and processing of feelings (Smirnova and Poluektova, 2023).

In addition, recognition of the significant structural inequalities faced by potential participants influenced our desire to utilise an approach sensitive to considerations of power and status. Participatory research elements held promise for challenging normative hierarchies which shape knowledge production in the humanities and social sciences (Larkins and Satchwell, 2023). Equally we understood that creative methods are not synonymous with participatory research practices and may need adaptation to meet participatory ideals. We heeded warnings from Bishop (2012) about the co-option or misuse of the language of participation within arts practice, and Sandlin et al.'s (2017) cautions against a 'taken-for-granted notion among many scholars' (p. 58) that participants always experience creative methodologies as empowering. Yet equally we drew on learning from 'arts for social change' which recognises a legitimate claim for the role of art and creative practices in concerns with social transformation (Bos and Huss, 2023; Capous-Desyllas and Morgaine, 2017).

Finally, the focus of our research on the concept of resistance informed our choices. As noted above, we anticipated that acts of 'resistance' may not be recognised as such in young people's

lives. The term itself remains polysemous and ambiguous. Expecting young people to connect with the idea or respond to direct questions about it felt unrealistic, leading us to adopt exploratory methods that also held pedagogical potential to support young people's own learning and reflection alongside elicitation. Relatedly, we held a desire to challenge familiar binaries and language associated with young people and sexual violence, such as risk and victimisation – hoping to 'make the familiar strange' (Mannay, 2010). Drawing on Deleuze (2000), Mannay (2016) highlights the particular contribution of creative methods to support the endeavour of 'abandoning the constraints inherent to language and adopting the stance of a nomadic thinker who is free to create new connections and open up experience' (p. 95). This in turn aligns with traditions in socially engaged arts practices which often centre a concern with challenging hegemonic narratives and destigmatising marginalised groups (Bos and Huss, 2023). These approaches also share features in common with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1973) who identified a role for visual methods in supporting collective critical consciousness raising (*conscientização*) whereby individuals re-imagine social realities and experience new awareness of their circumstances and needs.

The remainder of this article explores the use of participatory, arts-based methodologies in research with young people impacted by sexual violence and trauma, examining if and how they contributed to safe, ethical practice, addressing asymmetries of power and elicitation of new knowledge in this context. Recognising that the contribution of creativity within research, like participation, can often be poorly theorised, with accounts of practice leaning towards the descriptive, the article aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which our methods enabled or supported these ideals.

Methodology

A series of arts-based workshops were undertaken in three sites across England with different partner organisations – all of whom provided specialist support to young people impacted by sexual violence and had existing commitments to participatory and/or creative group work. A range of 5 to 10 workshops were held in each site, from 2021 to 2023, involving 14 young people – all of whom had experience of sexual violence or related forms of harm.

Our initial intention was to conduct a Photovoice project, following a structured workshop plan, enabling participants to create photographic images which communicated a personal story or perspective relating to resistance, shared through a final exhibition (Wang and Burris, 1997). However, as explained below, our processes evolved, becoming more heterogeneous and involving photography, mono-printing, movement, collage, game playing and writing.

The project culminated in a series of co-produced outputs: three zines, a project film and an embroidered quilt (inspired by the role of quilts in protests and resistance movements; see Fountain, 2023). Ideas about creative methodology surfaced during workshops and were sense-checked during a one-off workshop bringing together artists involved in 'socially engaged' creative projects and child welfare practitioners interested in utilising the arts, all of whom worked with young people impacted by trauma.

The concept of 'data' within the project was messy, taking multiple forms including fieldwork notes ($n=21$), 10 recorded discussions (including audio recordings, transcriptions and flip chart notes), other workshop artefacts (e.g. a 'Post-it note mapping' exercise) and artistic outputs produced by participants in response to workshop provocations. These included photography (e.g. 300+ images), collage, poems and monoprints. Reflections from participants and staff were captured through more traditional audio-recorded and transcribed interviews ($n=10$). An additional level of reflexive data recorded conversations between the authors. The approach aligned with what O'Neill (2012) describes as ethno-mimesis. This refers to a research process and artistic

praxis which incorporates visual, ethnographic and participatory action research methodologies, undertaken with and for groups of marginalised individuals, and which supports mutual recognition and redistribution. This sought to attend to the 'politics of feeling' and 'the wonder' (MacLure, 2013: 228) evoked by specific fragments of data and research interactions which 'reach out from the inert corpus (corpse) of the data, to grasp us . . .' (p. 228).

Ethics

Ethical approval was provided by the University of Sussex Social Sciences and Arts Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (Ref: AH/t001887/1), and ongoing ethical practice was supported by reflective research practice enabling the project design to respond to emerging participant needs. Safe, supportive practice also depended on specialist practice partners whose time was funded to respond to welfare issues. This included supporting participants to make informed choices about participation, being present within workshops and following up on disclosures or issues of concern raised by young people in the context of the project (see also Ellis et al., 2023).

Findings

Part 1: recognising resistance and fostering 'spaciousness'

We begin by reflecting on time spent coming together, building trust and developing relationships. While this 'work' often lies outside the boundaries of methodological interest, it was a central and resource-intensive aspect of our research process and directly impacted knowledge produced. We therefore intentionally move this from the margins to the centre of our methodological discussion, acknowledging the significance of finding ways to create a sense of *spaciousness*[1] within the project, recognising its importance in enabling collaborative working across divides marked by age, institutional, status and biographical aspects of identity. We use the term spaciousness to express both the space afforded by *time* (taking our time; making time; going at our own pace) and the *loosening of objectives* (space to redirect; deviate from plans; centre new priorities). Spaciousness was not consciously built into our plans or identified as a priority, but rather developed from the challenges and resistance posed to us by participants and partners.

Ironically, our initial experience of learning about resistance within the project emerged not through elicitation techniques but through young people's resistance to our workshop timescale and structure. Here, we experienced diverse forms of 'everyday resistance': in the form of 'foot dragging' and 'false compliance' as Scott (1989: 35) describes it, or what Foucault (2007) calls 'the art of voluntary insubordination' (p. 47).

In all three sites, workshops began slowly. Young people drifted in and settled, and although their participation was voluntary, there seemed a desire in some cases to communicate ambivalence or an, as yet, undetermined commitment to the project. In other cases, late arrivals or non-attendance resulted from other challenges participants faced. These were rarely small and included parenthood; housing insecurity and transitions; educational pressures; financial hardships; health and disability issues and in one case the recent, raw loss of a friend through murder.

We learned we had significantly underestimated the time required for participants to simply be alongside one another and the research team. The structured workshop design had to adapt to the variable time, motivation and energy participants could offer, and also to our realisation that photography simply did not hold the degree of novelty or appeal for participants that we had anticipated (see Warnock et al., 2023). Within a planned 5-hour workshop, we came to recognise we actually had a more limited window of 'focused' time – usually no more than 2 or 3 hours. From

the outside, much of our revised approach looked simply like the mundane, uncreative labour of making and drinking tea, procrastinating about lunch orders, ordering taxis and casual chat. It was, perhaps, what Baraitser (2017: 49) described as time spent 'maintaining' – time that folds in on itself, time hidden away or trapped but essential as 'durational practices that keep things going'. Making space for this slow-moving time at the beginning of the workshops responded to participants' needs and enabled the foundational work of testing one another out, and engaging in the small acts of reciprocity that developed the trust and familiarity on which our research was built.

The initial resistance young people enacted was something we learned to attune and yield to; bearing the discomfort we felt (particularly as social scientists), more used to research structures that are predictable and ordered. Our fieldwork notes reflect this: 'literally not one second went to plan!'; 'Day one was a nightmare – we achieved nothing'.

During this time, young people presented their own needs in terms of both provocations which challenged our externally imposed plans 'I hate art. I hate photography' and 'we all hate pizza' (young women, site 1) and very real, practical challenges relating to their wellbeing – for example a young woman who felt unable to leave the building ('L') for activities due to issues relating to her safety. For the researchers, there was anxiety associated with these challenges and changes. Initially, this felt like a failure to meet project aims or to elicit what we (thought we) needed from participants. In retrospect, it is clear that this feeling partly represented our struggles with ceding control, underpinned by thoughts of funder expectations and our own institutional constraints. As the project went on, our acceptance of adapting and working according to the rhythms and needs of participants grew. We continued to challenge participants to try new things within the project – but also learned to value displays of resistance as opportunities for young people to teach us about creative forms of coping and subversion as well as their needs. Practically, this meant changing and extending our workshop structures in every site, and adding additional meeting opportunities and alternative arts practices that responded to participants' interests. It also meant holding space for priorities that emerged from discussions and at times felt disconnected from our project focus.

Borrowing from Kelly's (2003) work, we also reflected that creating 'spaciousness' within the project may counter the usual restrictions imposed on girls' and young women's 'space for action' (p. 143), both through gendered violence and institutional responses. Ensuring the project maximised participants' sense of control and choice was part of the process of fostering safety, but also supported participants' capacity to engage in complex thinking and experiment with new creative practices. Specifically, it supported young people taking risks, free from pressure to deliver or perform to set expectations. This was critical in enabling their creative, arts-based practice and the entangled critical thinking we aimed to foster.

Working within the 'contact zone'

An additional dynamic informing these processes was the issue of project 'ownership'. In renegotiating project boundaries, it became clear that imbalances in power and status between ourselves (facilitators) and project participants were significant. These were alluded to by participants communicating sensitivity to subtle signifiers of identity and class between them and researchers. Jokingly in one workshop participants summed up their view of the researcher as: 'a rice cake person' 'the type who gives kids healthy food' and 'a recycling, nature person'. While shared affectionately, these comments highlighted the 'them and us' oppositions noted and marked by young participants. Yet at the same time the opportunity taken by participants to tease and caricature those within the workshop who outwardly held the most 'power' marked a gentle moment of redistribution.

Despite our rhetoric about the participatory nature of the project, it still began as our own initiated, designed and led by us: what Cornwall (2004: 76) describes as an 'invited space' of participation. Young people knew little at this stage beyond vague descriptions from project information sheets. Only we (as researchers) knew what lay ahead in terms of workshop plans and project objectives. This asymmetry in knowledge and control reflects a key challenge of participatory research where 'subject positions of the researcher and the researched are hard to overcome' (Fox, 2013: 989).

Yet we were also partly on young people's territory, bringing our ideas into their project spaces –and it was crucial to hold in mind that trust and commitment could not be taken for granted.

In seeking to understand more about the dynamics that supported productive and dialogical interactions within the project, we found it useful to draw on Torre and Fine's (2008) concept of 'contact zones': a device for theorising relationships within participatory research, drawing on the work of Pratt (1991). The term highlights interactions and dynamics that occur within a 'messy social space where differently situated people "meet, clash, and grapple with each other" across their varying relationships to power' (Pratt, 1991: 4). It makes explicit power differentials all too often masked beneath participatory rhetoric. It also invites thinking beyond simple recognition of differences between participants or cohorts, focusing on relationships and interactions. It formed a device to help us interrogate how our different subjectivities and identities are formed and reformed in relation to one another. We could not erase or escape our different statuses within the project relating to class, role, education, ethnicity or biography, but our working practices held potential to enable productive collaboration across (and because of) these differences.

We discovered from these reflections that creative practices alone were not enough to foster a participatory culture in which collaboration and dialogue were possible and traditional power dynamics challenged. Rather, young people's fullest participation was enabled by extending the time and boundaries of the project – supported by arts-attuned funding that valued experimentation, flexibility and responsiveness. Arts-based research practices were undoubtedly supportive of this but ultimately fostering participatory relationships felt less dependent on *what* we did and more on *how* to be.

Part 2: creative practices and the role of playfulness

The quality we have termed 'spaciousness' alone was clearly not enough to enable the productive, creative and dialogical interactions we sought from the project. It supported engagement, collaboration, a degree of trust and safety and indeed conditions for creativity. However, there were other dynamics worthy of our attention.

Specifically, we reflected on the significance and pervasiveness of playfulness within the workshops. By *playfulness*, we refer not to formal game playing (though at times part of it), or enforced jollity, but rather the atmosphere and activities which enable participants to play with different ideas, trying them on for size and holding them lightly. It was an approach which aimed to foster improvisation and 'depressurise spaces for taking risks' (Mulgrew, 2024, personal communication) alongside moments of surprise, pleasure and humour. Playfulness allowed both us (the research team) and participants to improvise, try things out and allow the project to respond and flex – what artist educator Fletcher et al. (2008) describes as 'change as it goes along'. Furthermore, we recognised how its presence acted as a leveller across our diverse contact zone. This was demonstrated by participants playfully centring aspects of their identities that had previously been used to marginalise them, within discussions and image making. Examples included a young woman playfully using the speed of her wheelchair to her advantage in competitive games or young people highlighting their queer and non-binary identities as part of humour and provocations.

For these reasons, and as an ever-present dynamic in workshops, playfulness felt worthy of further consideration, challenging its usual dismissal as incidental or frivolous.

The first example we use to represent the significance of playfulness was far from light-hearted. It started with a provocation:

> Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare. (Lorde, 1988: 125)

This was purposefully introduced to present participants with new possibilities for framing resistance – specifically Lorde's idea of taking care of herself as a means of resisting a hostile culture which did not value her.

Both quote and author were unfamiliar to participants and provided a curious talking point: 'what does it even mean?' 'I don't understand it'. This was an opportunity to introduce Lorde both as an individual steeped in cultures of resistance and as a prompt to consider new ideas about what resistance could look like. The juxtaposition of self-care and political warfare suggested new ideas. It highlighted the possibility for acts of resistance to be embedded in everyday actions that seem small or mundane but are in some way protective of mental, physical and emotional wellbeing. The project's artist facilitator (BW) prompted us to write our own examples on Post-it notes, and to think broadly, reminding us to think beyond what were considered 'healthy' or normative coping strategies. The exercise deliberately encouraged participants to reframe these experiences, supporting them to access the theoretical concept of 'everyday resistance' that framed our study (Scott, 1989). It allowed them to play with binaries and hierarchies, recognise nuance and ambiguity, value seemingly 'silly' suggestions and consider the multiple forms that resistance can take. The exercise was further catalysed by facilitators sharing irreverent or surprising examples of their own, further eroding divisions between facilitators and participants.

Examples of 'self-care' as resistance ranged from face masks, reading trashy novels, eating comfort food and taking hot baths to smoking, skipping school, self-harm and casual sex (see Figure 1). Individual Post-it notes were placed along an imaginary axis from 'healthy' to 'unhealthy' with facilitators deliberating questioning more obvious placings – 'Can smoking or self-harm ever be considered a healthy response to something?' Playfulness and provocation characterised the conversation as we surprised ourselves with new ideas, laughed in recognition with one another's so-called 'guilty pleasures' and tried to avoid making judgements. Shared laughter was a central tool here, diffusing tension and enabling the gravity of some subject matter to be held with lightness. Our critical thinking muscles were comfortably loosened in this moment and participants shared insights into their experiences of survival, coping, mischief, humour and 'getting through'.

Despite potential for disclosing sensitive and personal experiences in this activity, safety was supported by the volume and relative anonymity of statements which became moved and manipulated by the group. The group's responses were limited to the statements themselves rather than the author. This act of turning an idea or an experience into a physical object – a Post-it note – which can be held and moved around in space – appeared to contain and limit its personal and emotive association.

Activities like this also foster mutual recognition and solidarity (Honneth, 1995) as members of the group relate to other people's statements or recognise solidarity across multiple versions of the same statement. The activity also provided an opportunity for boundaries to be bridged within our 'contact zone' – between young people and the professionals in the room – when ideas spanned differences in age, status, ethnicity and class.

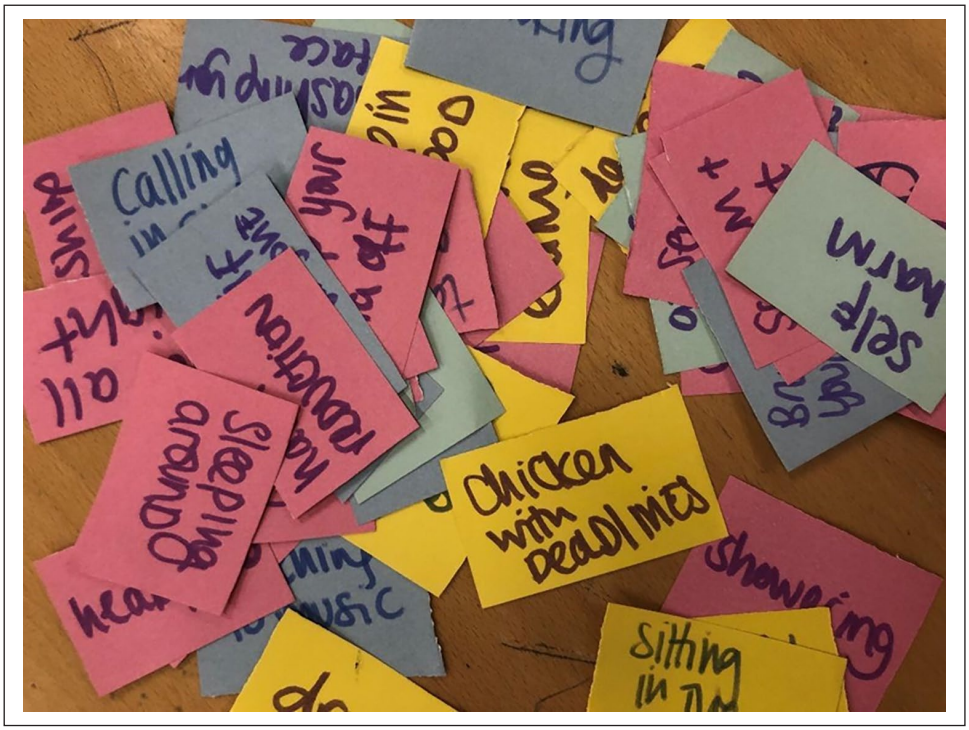


Figure 1. Post-it notes from continuum of self-care exercise.

Framing and reframing: trying ideas on for size

The idea of 'trying ideas on for size' permeated the project. It was supported by the extended workshop format (half- or full-day workshops run over days or weeks) where unlike a research interview, there were opportunities for participant's ideas to remain subject to change. In practice, this meant participants moving from a position where they stated: 'I still don't understand what you mean by resistance' (fieldwork notes, site 1) to a place where they could skilfully reclaim examples of actions that may have been overlooked or judged, and present them as agentic demonstrations of resistance. These examples include those where young people described challenging those in positions of authority (such as social workers, teachers, parents and even taxi drivers), and those that focused on defying expectations – such as when a young woman explained how her disciplined approach to parenting, which confounded professional expectations, was a form of resisting the limited expectations she felt professionals had of herself and her daughter.

The various methods, provocations and mediums with which participants could express themselves allowed ideas to be represented in different ways, modified, questioned and then reframed, rejected, replaced or settled upon with new confidence. Creative techniques and activities which supported this ranged from game playing, simple poetry exercises, collage and mono-printing – at times using surreal or fantastical images to convey feelings of resistance (see Figure 2).

Movement away from traditional qualitative methods towards more playful modes of communication was also seen to support self-expression. When one young person repeatedly struggled to put her ideas into words, she was invited (by the artist facilitator) to 'try telling it to us, as a story'. This simple reframing immediately enabled her to express her perspective. For the social scientists within the team, this simple approach came as a revelation, revealing both the limitations of

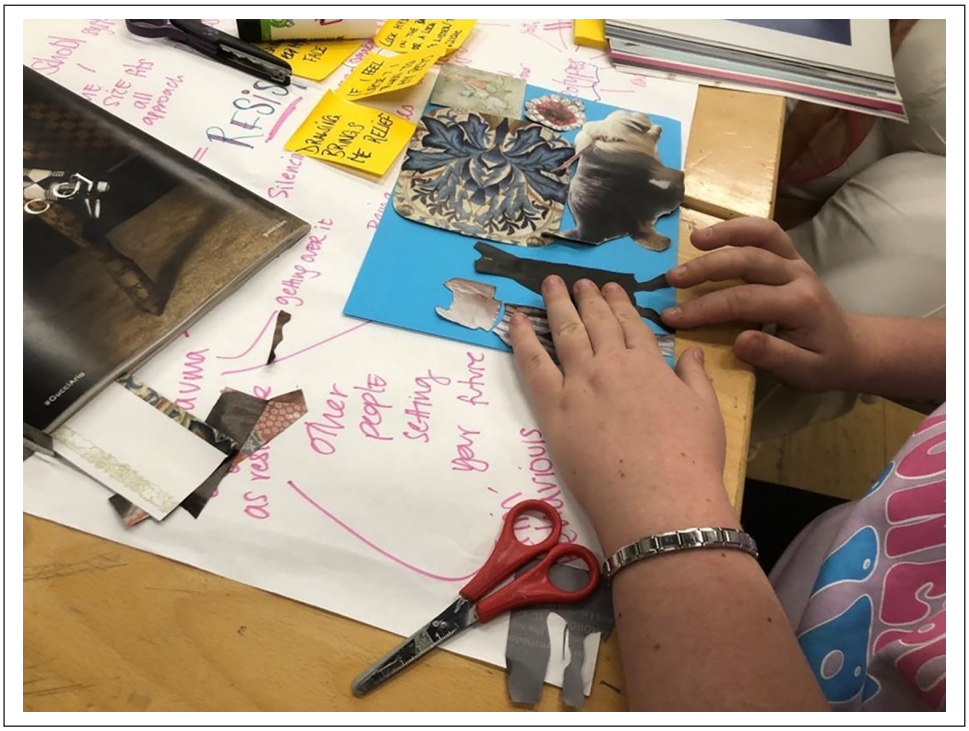


Figure 2. Image from workshop 3 – collage making.

traditional questioning (the default foundation of our data collection) and the potential for more fiction-based narratives to support sharing of subjective truths.

The success of these approaches was evident when young people identified accessing new awareness and critical perspectives. A striking example of this came in the second site where a young woman who self-identified as regularly getting into fights was able to recognise and articulate a parallel between these behaviours (her feisty, aggressive side) and the strategies she employed to protect herself from emotional harm, the impact of trauma and the multiple contexts of vulnerability she navigated in her daily life. The workshops provided space and tools for her to find new ways of making sense of herself – helping her to feel more fully recognised and understood, and less self-critical. Crucially, actions which had previously been framed in her mind as deviant and bad were now understood by her as part of coping and resisting harm.

Playfulness was also central to production of our outputs where the project supported young people to play with issues of identity and representation. This was particularly apparent in a session focused on studio photography. Young people brought clothes or objects from home to 'art direct' portraits relating to their personal ideas about resistance – their choice of objects spanning the seemingly mundane to the imaginative: dolls, books, clothes, tattoos and flags. Within a studio setting created in the workshop, young people were given time to control and curate self-representations using props, lighting and framing, playing with representation and narrative and exercising their creativity in new ways (see Figure 3). Here too the constructivist tendencies of the project became explicit and shared – supporting young people to construct a selective public image – and offering us, and wider audiences, new ways of knowing and understanding their realities according to these choices.



Figure 3. Image from workshop 1: Studio photography.

Throughout this activity, participants playfulness became part of their resistance, confounding expectations and further challenging normative or typical accounts of young women impacted by criminal and sexual exploitation.

Discussion

The Imagining Resistance project aimed to learn, in collaboration with young people, how exploring resistance as a topic might influence their own understandings of sexual abuse and other forms of violence. In so doing, we sought to influence the discourses surrounding professional practice within this field and the health, education and social care interventions meant to 'help' them. The sensitive subject matter and complex group dynamics required us to work in a way which felt both light and free from pressure while also supporting participants to take risks and step into unknown territories.

From the start, our process of producing knowledge collectively was committed to fostering young people's critical thinking skills (Freire, 1973). This required us to create what has been termed a 'brave space' (Arao and Clemens, 2013: 141) as opposed to an entirely 'safe space' 'free of discomfort or difficulty' (p. 139). It was thus vital to engender a strong locus of control within participants to ensure that any risks (creative or otherwise) were taken on their own terms within a bounded and supportive environment. The quality we referred to as spaciousness within the project felt critical to this. This meant depressurising and de-centring our own working practices and relieving ourselves of the anxieties that surface when researchers' or facilitators' roles are (too) tightly framed by predefined outputs or narrow aims. Recognising the dynamic, relational nature of such anxieties and their potential to 'infect' our working spaces and contact zones highlighted the significance of consciously letting these go. It allowed us to yield to push back (or push in

different directions) from participants and work at a pace that felt safe. This 'safe pace' usually required the book-ending of slow but important grounding and relational work of relaxed 'check-ins', catch-ups or wind downs, extended lunches and tangential conversations. As the project continued, coming to terms with this rhythm appeared to minimise resistance, promote trust and foster safety. These practices became part of the careful maintenance of community which enabled collaborative sharing and critical consciousness raising – all within a sometimes highly charged 'contact zone' – alive with stark differences in biographies, power and privilege. Like others before us (Sandlin et al., 2017), we learned to recognise this new rhythm as a fundamental aspect of negotiating participatory dynamics.

Meanwhile qualities of playfulness and provocation were also found to be critical – simultaneously supporting us to keep things light while pushing new ideas and generative dialogue – enabling collective criticality to think anew about the role and contribution of resistance in young people's lives. Creative activities became both the scaffolding to undertake this new collective thinking and a means of creating a productive safe and enjoyable community in which young people were supported to externalise new or hidden insights through words and images. Furthermore, our attendance to young people's own resistance to aspects of the project plans, and their need for dynamics of lightness and space, supported us to recognise vital learning that also comes from embodied knowledge.

The implications for this learning have consequences for future research project design, funding and management. Positioning the need for flexibility and responsiveness as integral to ethics and methodology may help us to build this 'emergent space' more consciously into project design. However, doing so successfully requires relationships of trust between researchers, funders and managers – authorising such approaches and allowing researchers the permission to deviate, slow and resist traditional project trajectories and outputs. For early career researchers, this may require different types of support – legitimising uncertain outcomes and building confidence to recognise the potential of knowledge to emerge from unanticipated places.

Conclusion

This article set out to test the claims of arts-based and creative methods in contexts of sensitive research with young people spanning health, education and social science. It analysed claims that such methods support ethical practice, address power differentials, and facilitate data elicitation. It found evidence of all three taking place within the project but argues for the need to think beyond broad rhetoric about the 'magic' of arts-based or creative methods, to better understand the mechanisms through which they work. Crucially, it allowed us to recognise participant resistance as a communicative and productive quality, providing us with practical learning to inform future research design, facilitation and budgets. Its success reminds us of the importance of attending to the dynamics and politics of how we present and utilise our methods and how we take up and offer space within the 'contact zones' of participatory research.

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Note

1. This term was first suggested to CW by a participant from a previous participatory project (Hagell, 2013) 'The project is spacious – we all have the room to be ourselves' (p. 15).

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