

Confronting the ambiguities of safe space in creative and participatory work

Background to the research

This chapter is based on pilot research aimed to bring together academic researchers, third sector organisations, practitioners and policy makers in order to affect social change beyond academia through innovative methodologies informed by a participatory ethos. The project used a range of participatory methods and practices with the purpose of providing a creative space for migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking people to have their voices and opinion heard through civic engagement and bottom-up participation. It draws on an ongoing research collaboration with a London based women's charity helping Middle Eastern women to break from isolation, guide them out from the confinement of the home and help them feel more integrated in the community. Services provided by the organisation include signposting and accompanying women in need to the general practitioner (GP), helping with language barriers and providing welfare advice. In partnering with MEWso I build on my previous research (Vacchelli and Peyrefitte 2018, Mesarič and Vacchelli 2019, Vacchelli and Mesarič 2020), which suggests that women's organisations are sensitive to intersectional inequalities and are constantly developing ways to overcome institutional gaps in welfare provision by finding alternative approaches to provide customised support to the women they help.

In order to achieve the development of a bottom-up approach to addressing social segregation and harmful familial practices such as polygamy and domestic violence, the research approach needed to reflect the extreme sensitivity of the themes we were going to discuss with participants. Co-producing qualitative data using a participatory approach such as Digital Storytelling (DS) seemed to be the most viable way to engage groups of women who- in most cases -already knew each other and were used to sharing personal issues in a group. In order to achieve a collective sharing of these sensitive issues, we needed to create a 'safe space' where women could feel comfortable in each other's presence

and with us (a researcher and a digital storytelling facilitator with decades of experience in the field of creative and participatory methodologies).

Can space ever be safe? Exploring definitions

The discipline of geography represents a benchmark for the analysis of space and its essence. Space is never a neutral, empty container. On the contrary it needs to be grasped as relational, quintessentially social and constitutive of social relations. Space moreover is contended, negotiable, ridden with conflicts and splits. Conflicts however contribute to construct its meaning and open up new ways of being and relating. Feminist geography in the 1980s and 1990s initiated a systematic reflection on women's experience of fear in the city (Pain 2001) and how this very feeling of fear and actual risk needed to be understood in the context of dominant discourses on urban safety (Hartal 2018). Rachel Pain (2001) introduced the idea that space itself is gendered through constructions of women's fear which have implications for their perception of risk. Women's socialisation in space, their perceptions as well as their actual experiences of space, that can include sexual harassment, contribute to construe womanhood and girlhood as fearful in public spaces. Space is gendered, heterosexual, classed and racialised as different women will have varied perceptions of space according to their distinctive subject positions. To carry out ethically informed research, it is necessary to think through the complexity of space and, especially when it comes to group work, carefully consider how to best create an arena able to welcome differences and accommodate the potential vulnerability of participants in the moment they decide to share their personal experiences and stories. The term 'safe space' has been often used for this purpose.

'Safe space' has been defined as the practice of establishing ground rules and guidelines for conversations and behaviours (Arao and Clemens 2013). Rules for a safe space include 'agree to disagree', 'don't take things personally', no judgement, no aggression, an acceptance of other people's mistakes and decisions about how actively participants should participate (Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin 2007). In principle, a safe space should be an inclusive environment where people can express their own identity freely. Safety in this context includes physical, psychological, social and emotional safety (Hartal 2018) and also implies absence of danger and fear. The origin of this term traces back to second wave feminist women only spaces in the US and Europe (Lewis et al 2015, Flasner and Von der Lippe 2019) when women, about to establish themselves as political subjects, needed to separate themselves from the male gaze and artificially created a social field and language to represent them away from everyday life, imbued with patriarchal values and practices. This experience was also crucial to Afro-American women who approached feminist separatism from an

intersectional perspective arguing that they needed to create selective forms of solidarity addressing different systems of oppression and work with White women against patriarchy and with Black men against racism (Combahee Collective 1983). Conflicts around the idea of a safe space are also reflected in the current divisive debate that sees a split between trans-supporting feminists and gender critical feminists who argue over the question of whether male-to-female trans women should have access to women only spaces (understood as spaces only accessible to biological women) (Lewis et al 2015).

The instance of trying to define safe space reveals that there are several tensions around this term and that the idea of safe space itself is extremely contested. Power marks some bodies as ones who belong, excluding others. A look to yoga communities (Cook-Cottone and Douglas 2017) shows how positive embodiment is the ability to sense and feel through the body in the present moment. Anthropologists have coined the term embodied space as a model for how the human body interacts with the world to craft a sense of place and belonging (87). Safe space in the context of body positive communities means that people are not called to change but adapt and nourish who they are. In body positive safe spaces, participants are able to discuss how and why they usually do not feel welcome. However, Cook-Cottone and Douglas (2017) point to the fact that yoga spaces amplify the split between who is and who is not allowed to partake in spaces that are construed as 'purified' and characterised by the predominance of White thin bodies. The excluding nature of yoga studios calls for more bodily positive safe spaces and a platform to express feelings external to pre-scripted narratives. Similarly, researchers trying to achieve a safe (enough) space for sharing personal experiences need to carefully consider the social field they are creating, the interpersonal relations between participants, the place where data collection takes place. Reflection is also needed on whether the relationship that can be forged in a given time between researchers and participants can engender the necessary trust for sharing personal experiences. In this chapter, I discuss some unexpected outcomes in my experience of attempting to create a safe enough space (Sykes and Gachago 2018) for migrant women to share their experiences of family life including polygamous relations and domestic abuse.

To date, the idea of a safe space has mainly been discussed and developed within education (Areo and Clemens 2013, Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin 2007, Barret 2010, Flasner and Von der Lippe 2019, Fernando and Bennet 2019) with regards to attempts of educators to shape a learning environment able to allow students to engage with controversial issues. Pioneering work in education however has problematised the notion of a safe space (Boostrom 1998) by suggesting that learning necessarily involves risk taking and that a safe space itself is potentially counterproductive to effective pedagogic

strategies. Authentic learning and social justice work involve risk, which is incompatible with safety (Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin 2007). Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin (2007) highlight the pervasive nature of systemic and institutionalised oppression which precludes the creation of safety of any space situated within that system. In particular, safety is more difficult to achieve for oppressed groups along racial, class and gender lines (Sykes and Gachago 2018). Teaching aboriginal content in social work education, Fernando and Bennet (2019) argue that space can be unsafe, and educators need to create cultural safety in the classroom. In order to do so, a trauma informed model is needed. Trauma occurs when 'one loses a sense of having a safe place to retreat to within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions and experiences' (2-3) and translates in soul wounds that fracture one's ability to relate to the self, others and the environment. Their study explains how historical and psychological trauma becomes embedded in the cultural memory of a people and is passed on to their children. In order to build trust in a group, be it in the classroom or in a research context, it is important to create sharing practices that are able to mitigate power relations and possible re-traumatisation in the group. Sitting in circle to preserve oral traditions and practices through storytelling is a practice that taps into ancestral rituals of storytelling where mutual support and empathy are cultivated through reciprocal identification and listening. The story circle (Lambert 2006) is a pivotal feature of the Digital Storytelling approach for sharing the stories and can be considered as a mutually supportive space where participants are helped to relate to the self and others in the group.

While safe spaces are usually discussed in the context of education, in this contribution I will offer a reflection on safe space as a pre-condition of disclosure of personal experiences when collecting research data in the context of a group-based data collection methodology and more specifically a workshop. In previous work, I have discussed the under-reported role of the workshop format for producing qualitative data especially when using unconventional methodologies such as creative and participatory approaches (Caretta and Vacchelli 2015). One of the strongest rationales for using creative and participatory methodologies instead of more traditional approaches to collecting qualitative data, is that interviews can potentially feel like direct questioning for research participants- something that is far from desirable when working with vulnerable groups. When working with refugees who are escaping torture in their country of origin or have experienced trauma along their migration trajectory, Home Office interrogations and direct request for details during hearings can have the effect of re-traumatising refugees who are being questioned. Moreover, scholars have criticised 'extractive' research (Kouritzin and Nakagawa 2018) where researchers question the research participant, extracting what they need whilst not worrying about following up, or making

sure participants are satisfied with the way they have been represented in the research. Research set up this way is not concerned about setting up a data collection process where participants can also be engaged in the research process as co-producers of the knowledge that is being created. Building on these critiques, using creative and participatory approaches is becoming more and more identified with conducting ethical research (Kara 2018), exactly because of the emphasis on the relation of trust that is cultivated by the researchers even before the onset of the data collection process. This relation of trust relies on the idea of a safe space that is skilfully created by researchers who have the interests of research participants at heart and who want to create an environment which is conducive for participants to share personal experiences, taking on board and addressing the vulnerability that emerges from the act of sharing. A study on palliative care in hospitals exploring death and dying (Collier 2016) made use of video-reflexive ethnography as a way to develop practice in health care. Mobilising ethical considerations inspired by indigenous research ethical frameworks, this study ensured that research was carried out in a respectful manner, in an ethical and participatory way, with researchers trying to see the world from the perspective of indigenous people. In this study, a detailed account of procedures, consent seeking, transparency etc. counts as making space 'safe'. Similarly, Latimer et al. (2018) attempted to create a safe space for First Nations youth in Canada to share experiences of pain using art-based methods to inform culturally appropriate assessment and treatment. PAR (Participatory Action Research) talking circle used the Indigenous Medicine Wheel as a culturally sensitive tool for addressing dimensions of body, mind, emotions and spirit, building on the indigenous concept of two 'eyed seeing' in an approach that combined co-learning and integrative processes. Creating a space safe enough for participants to share personal experiences requires a constant reflection and effort to engage with different perspectives.

Making space safe

Negotiating trust is a particularly important aspect of making space safe as without trust in the process, in the facilitator and mutually among participants, the sharing would not take place. Literature on participatory research and ethical research (Kara 2018) tends to emphasise trust between the researchers and participants, while trust between participants is often overlooked. Here I discuss the importance of trust between participants to make a place feel safe and confront other instances where trust can go amiss, and other unforeseen situations, making the data collection processes fraught with ethical dilemmas.

This project aimed to explore personal experiences of family life including polygamy and domestic abuse. It mainly used Digital Storytelling (DS) as a data collection strategy. DS is a two to five-minute audio-visual clip realised over a 2/3 day workshop. This is usually facilitated by a Digital Storytelling practitioner who leads the workshops, facilitates the co-production of the stories and also edits the short videos. The first day of the workshop is designed to negotiate trust with the group through a series of activities where participants share some aspects of their personal life. Usually, by the end of day one, participants have created a short story about one aspect of their life (focusing for instance on migrating to the UK/being part of the Muslim community/ living around Finsbury Park). The second day is usually dedicated to constructing the film, designing a storyboard, retrieving the images for the video (using personal pictures, sourcing them from the internet or going out to source the images in the real world using mobile phone photography). After this phase, usually on day three, facilitators/researchers help participants record the audio of the story and edit a short video featuring the participant's voice and any image or picture the participant wants included in their digital story. Participants are assisted in creating their DS video clips in their own language or in English. The digital stories of participants who are not Anglophone and prefer to tell their story in their own language have sub-titles in English. Other approaches used during the workshops, such as body-map storytelling, will be explored in the relevant sections (specifically the Finsbury Park workshop section). When necessary, a combination of interviews and facilitated group activities was used during the workshops.

Research participants were recruited through our partner organisation. Participants were reimbursed for travel expenses and were given vouchers to thank them for their time. Lunches and refreshments were organized and provided by the research team. The workshops saw the participation of myself in the role of the researcher, a Digital Storytelling facilitator who was in charge of designing, facilitating the activities during the workshop in consultation with me and delivering the final participatory artefacts, an external consultant who previously worked as research assistant on this project and the CEO of the local organisation. The CEO of MEWso participated in some of the workshops, took care of several logistical aspects of the workshops and without her input and networks in the community the project would not have been possible.

Workshop 1, Westminster

The workshop at Westminster took place in February 2018 over two consecutive Fridays and saw the participation of six women from Bangladesh in their 30s and 40s. The participants already knew each

other and belong to a small community of Bangladeshi migrants, who joined the UK mainly through marriage migration. The workshops took place in a community centre in the London Borough of Westminster where most participants volunteer on a daily basis. During this workshop, despite the ice breaking activities and our attempts to help the participants share stories about their families, there was some reticence in disclosing personal stories in the group, especially when it came to relationship with their husbands. While the relationships the women have with their children was talked about openly, the relationship with their husbands was more difficult to discuss. We knew from the organisation that had recruited the participants that some of these women were in polygamous families, however any attempt to discuss this delicate issue was met with a barrier of silence. We questioned whether our effort in setting up a safe space with rules about non-disclosure and anonymity was enough. During the workshop, we had to think of alternative activities that would not involve discussing marital relations and while the DS facilitator guided an alternative group activity, I carried out individual interviews with the women to see if a more private interaction away from the group would help disclosure.

Despite the relative success of this workshop, more time and resources are needed to create the necessary trust to talk about such personal issues. Moreover, the group dynamic between the participants, who all knew each other and are part of the same community, might have hindered disclosure in the group. During the workshop, the women felt more comfortable sharing memories and nostalgia for a lost sense of communal life, singing songs in Bengali and jointly reminiscing common imaginaries of their childhood in Bangladesh. During this workshop the research team learnt that power dynamics among the group, whether participants know each other or not, are a key aspect for creating a safe space. Would this workshop have been any different if participants had not known each other and had been external to their immediate community? Sharing of personal stories in a space created by researchers for the purpose of collecting sensitive data is context specific and reliant on the delicate interpersonal dynamics established within the group.

Workshop 2, Finsbury Park

The second workshop took place in March 2018 over two consecutive Wednesdays on the premises of the organisation that enabled this work. Participants in the second workshop included Kurdish women from Iraq and Iran and north African women from Libya and Morocco. The women's ages ranged from early 30s to 50s and they are in the UK as refugees on humanitarian grounds. Two of these women are highly qualified, one has a PhD as a molecular biologist and another one lived for

several years in Denmark after leaving Iran at the age of 19 and spending two years in Turkey. While in Denmark she was a translator of Kurdish children books into Danish. Most of the participants have been involved in polygamous relations in a way or another. Two of them were unaware they would be second wives when they married. Three of them were abandoned for another woman when they refused permission to allow their husband to contract a second marriage. In one case, the husband had anyway gone ahead to marry another woman (through religious marriage) while still legally married to his first wife. Most of them were in relationships characterized by domestic violence and other forms of emotional manipulation and blackmailing.

Troubled by the barriers to sharing experienced in the previous group, the research team tried a different approach and decided to use body-map storytelling, which is particularly appropriate for helping participants to tell their story through drawing a life-size map of their own body and plot visual elements (such as speech bubbles or details of the body that have a meaning for the participant) on the real-sized body map that is hung on the wall and subsequently discussed. This approach has also been called 'visceral method' because it draws on the sensory and affective experiences participants mobilise to reveal discursive, material and structural aspects of their stories (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante, 2014). Cognitive maps have been seen as a mixture of spatial cognition, place representations and spatial imagination that can provide information not only about places themselves, but also about people's identities and behaviours in relation to them (Vacchelli 2018). Cognitive maps are able to fulfil ideas and images of individuals' economic, political, cultural and social contexts with an emphasis on their emotions and feelings (Mendoza and Morén-Alegret 2013: 775). Creating a safe space with this group appeared seamless and everyone was willing to share, including myself and the facilitator who took part in the activities. However, during the sharing of the body map activity, one of the participants felt upset while recounting her story and the way she was treated by her own family over the divorce she was undergoing after finding out she was a second wife. Her upset was further reinforced by the fact that the choice to divorce would have meant missing the opportunity to have children, something which is key in Muslim women's perception of womanhood and acceptance within the community. When she broke into tears, the group decided to interrupt the sharing. All participants demonstrated empathy and a few research participants went for a short walk with the woman who was experiencing distress during the sharing. Everyone tried to give their best advice on how to deal with the situation. After this, we resumed work without expecting the participant in question to complete her story. In this circumstance, as a research team we learnt that a space cannot be fully safe and that sharing entail showing one's vulnerability. The fact that the participant in question felt she could open up and way the group dealt with the

challenge of a participant breaking into tears demonstrated that the space of the workshop was safe enough for welcoming and addressing the participants' vulnerability. What if the experience of distress had been more severe? How do we 'contain' that space as researchers and facilitators?

Workshop 3, Archway

The third round of workshops took place on two consecutive Fridays in April 2018 in the building of a Methodist church at the heart of Archway in North London. These workshops saw the participation of a range of women from North Africa (Algeria), Kurdish Iran and Iraq. One of these women is highly qualified (a solicitor) who came to the UK with her Algerian husband in 2006. In 2013 she discovered her husband had a second wife but could not divorce because she did not have a visa. Even though she has since obtained a legal divorce, she still feels angry for the time this process took and the extent to which it has impacted her life, her eight years old child and her health. A Kurdish Iranian woman shared the story of her difficult escape during the Kuwait war in 1991. She firstly lived in Austria and arrived in the UK in 2011, where her marriage broke when she heard her husband had married another woman without asking her. All of these women experienced difficult divorces caused by un-consensual situations of polygamy combined with domestic abuse and heavy-going psychological manipulation, in one occasion with threats of honour killing by the family of one of the participants in Iraq. The approach we used during this workshop consisted of mapping the individual stories on paper through work in pairs. After the individual stories were shared in pairs, the participants shared their stories with the rest of the group.

The stories of two Kurdish women stood out as particularly difficult in terms of the impact they had on their lives. One of the women was already traumatized by having to flee Iraq at a time when Saddam Hussein was persecuting the Kurds. This experience is mixed with a sense of failure and remorse towards her teenage daughter for having lived in an abusive relationship with her husband. During this time, she did not realise he had several other lovers and at some point even married Islamically her best friend. She now feels empowered for having moved on but is still picking up the pieces of a weakened self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Similarly, an Iranian Kurdish woman spoke at length about her relationship with her ex-husband who firstly deceived her into promising her a different kind of life to the one he committed to and subsequently married somebody else while was still married to her. The videos of these two stories along other short videos that resulted from the previous workshops were showed at a community event in Andover Estate in July 2018, near Finsbury

Park, involving local communities of mainly Somali and Middle-Eastern residents across three generations.

The event was organised by the organisation who helped coordinate the Polygamy research. During the event, the findings of the project were discussed by myself and some of the videos realised in the course of the three workshops were showcased as a way to spark debate, raise awareness and encourage more members of the community to take part in future research. However, during the screening, the daughter of one of the storytellers who had co-produced the digital story reported feeling 'exposed'. As soon as I heard this, I called the participant expressing concern and apologising, offering reassurance that the video would not be showed in public again. The research team in this instance learnt that the artifact created through creative and participatory work needs to be treated with caution, considering all parties that might feel unsettled by the potentially unsafe space created during a public sharing of the artefact, despite the consent of the individual who crafted it.

Reflections on safe spaces

The fieldwork for the project discussed here revealed potential ambiguities and pitfalls in the creation of a space which is safe enough to share personal experiences in a research context. In the case of workshop 1, the fact research participants already knew each other prior to the workshops and their relation was such that they would not share marital experiences, contributed to make the space of the workshop feel unsafe and an arena where aspects of participants' personal lives could potentially be exposed. Another interpretation for their reluctance to share is the contested nature of polygamy, both within Islam and outside, where beliefs and practices of Muslim people are continuously disputed in post-multiculturalist Western contexts (Vacchelli 2017). Barret (2010), discussing the classroom, argues that power dynamics operate everywhere and so-called safe spaces cannot be understood as a community of equals. Boundaries we were erecting for safety unknowingly lead to potential exclusions along the lines of race, class, gender identity. Keenan and Darms (2013) maintain that the construction of an intimate counter-public, even when it claims to be a safe space, creates barriers to entry that can replicate power structures of larger publics, reinforcing Whiteness as normative through enacting a confessional confrontation of gender and family norms that are perceived to apply mainly to non-Muslim middle-class White women (i.e. the facilitator and the researcher), involuntarily creating discomfort or fear of being judged. Hardiman, Jackson and Griffin (2007) push this concept even further by suggesting that White people's insistence on safety as a

condition for their participation in cross-racial dialogue overlooks safety of Black people by constraining their participation to conform to these expectations of safety.

In the second workshop, one of the participants broke into tears while sharing a painful personal experience. It was no longer safe for her to continue, as disclosing personal experiences made her feel too vulnerable and unable to share further. The group immediately started acting in a reassuring way, mobilising empathy and care for the person who manifested her distress and trying to sustain the pact for a mutually supportive environment the group had agreed to at the start of the workshop. The term 'safe' is reassuring for those who feel anxious to share but the implications of its actual meaning became more apparent when the premises of that safety were shaken. Arao and Clemens (2013) ask if 'safe' is the same as comfort. When participants agree to making the space safe, it is often not overtly discussed if they are prepared to venture out of their comfort zone. Arao and Clemens (2013) also deliberate whether the term safe provides a hiding space and argue for a need to shift language from safe to brave spaces. According to Stengel and Weems (2010) safety is a relational concept precisely because risky and deeply connected to affective states. For Stengel and Weems (2010), it is fear that ironically structures the discursive practices of pedagogical (in this case, research) encounters. Hence, questioning fear, its origins and intent, are fundamental in order to understand inter-relational dynamics when collecting data.

The safe space challenge experienced during the community event is testimony of the fact that while highly charged emotional content is considered to be one of the desirable features of a digital story according to the pioneering work of Jo Lambeth (2016), it needs to be carefully considered and treated with caution and respect. Both producers of the digital story and researcher/practitioners are encouraged to consider their lack of control over the story once it is made public, and the potential for unintended reactions or interpretations to occur (Poletti 2011). In this case, the dent in safe space that myself as researcher and the facilitator had attempted to create happened in a temporally different circumstance situated outside of the workshop itself, which raises important ethical questions on the ownership of the story, the emotions at stake of all people involved when a story is showcased, the importance of the context and the control that participants have on the stories they produce and how they are used after their realisation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to define the term safe space, highlighting its ambiguities and the idea that space cannot be entirely safe as is imbued with power relations including racialised and

gendered hierarchies, among others. Some critical pedagogists have advanced the idea of a brave space and agree on the need for moving into unfamiliar territories as a necessary step to the learning process. Similarly to critical pedagogy, creative and participatory research aims to create moments of learning for participants, informed by a cycle of reflection and action as a way to give back to participants and do something useful for them. In the course of the research project discussed in this chapter, however, it became evident that safe space is fraught with ambiguities.

The three examples of a breach to space safety show in different ways that thinking in binary terms of a 'safe' as opposed to 'unsafe' space is not necessarily useful, as these spaces are not entirely safe and not entirely unsafe. It is the context in which they take place that makes them simultaneously safe and unsafe for different reasons; in addition to this, fear, which is responsible for making a space feel unsafe, is not the same for everyone. Scholars have pointed to the impossibility of safety in a highly unequal society (Skyles and Gachago 2018) and safety needs be negotiated contextually in the community, rather than imposed. According to Anzaldúa (2002) even the safest conceivable space as the home can be perceived as unsafe and dangerous exactly because it bears the likelihood of intimacy and thinner boundaries. Likewise, the intimacy created by the confessional nature of digital storytelling, in the context of the story circle, contributes to make these boundaries thin. However, making boundaries thin is a necessary condition for reaching out, as closing up and staying in one's own group, often a response to inner pain and fear, produces the ultimate effect of stagnating one's growth. Anzaldúa (2002:2) uses the language of bridging and opening up to the stranger within and without, implying an attitude of risk taking, and argues that "to bridge is to attempt community and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded" (3). Rather than a retreat into less challenging spaces, the risky relational labour towards the cultivation and proliferation of sites for challenging oppression and negotiating difference (Roestone Collective 2014) remains one of the necessary starting points for authentic learning.

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