

Connecting with Emotions: Exploring the Arts and Valid Research with Displaced Communities in Colombia

*Jonathan Franklin, International Development
University of East Anglia, UK
jonathan.franklin@uea.ac.uk*

Before starting my PhD in the autumn of 2017, I followed an impulse to leave my job in London and take some time off to travel. Having a soft spot for mountains, I was drawn to spend a month cycle touring in the truly breath-taking landscapes of Colombia's tropical Andes. Yet my experience in Colombia was in many ways shaped by a deeply moving visit to the Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellin during my first few days there. At that time, it was less than a year since the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The museum starkly confronts visitors with the immense toll five decades of civil war has taken. Its exhibits include harrowing first-hand accounts of people's experiences living amid physical and sexual violence, with the disappearance or murder of relatives, and forced recruitment into armed groups. Many fled their homes to escape the violence and seek security for themselves and their families. There is now thought to be some eight million people internally displaced in the country, which makes Colombia second only to Syria in the size of its displaced population.

When I returned to the UK to start the PhD, I found that some of my new colleagues had been working with displaced people in Colombia. The topic caught my attention, yet it was their innovative research approach – blending the creative arts with more conventional social science methods – that most interested me. Music, theatre, dance, and painting were at the centre of the research team's engagement with these marginalized communities. The project makes for a thought-provoking example of how novel approaches and methodologies are being used that reconsider the definition of validity in social research. For this feature piece, I will explore this by considering their approach in greater detail; speaking with two members of the research team, Teresa Armijos and Viviana Loaiza, on how the creative arts, emotions, and ethics interweave in their work.

The research project's title, 'Moving with Risk', reflects a focus on how forced displacement due to conflict has often brought people to be exposed to other forms of livelihood risks. While Colombia's tropical, mountainous geography is spectacular, it is also notorious for natural hazards such as floods, landslides, and volcanic eruptions. The Armero tragedy in 1985 stands out as a reminder of this. Over 20,000 people died when a volcanic eruption triggered a vast torrent of mud to cascade down its slopes, devastating the settlements in the valley below. With little real choice in the process, those displaced by the civil war have often rebuilt their lives in areas where they are exposed to these kinds of natural hazards. Their resettlement has effectively meant exchanging one form of catastrophic risk for another.

The research team wanted to better understand displaced people's life trajectories coping with these different forms of risks. The creative arts were used in different ways to explore risk trajectories as both individuals and communities. Individual stories were first elicited, using music as a vehicle for this process. Participants were asked to pick a song to share at the beginning of the interview, and their choice of song did not have to be relevant to any particular theme. It could simply be one they liked, or which resonated with them in some way and that they wanted to share. Reflecting on the music – what thoughts, memories, and emotions it evoked – was a way of opening up personal narratives of displacement and resettlement. The research team then invited communities to come together to produce collective stories of coping with risk. In a series of facilitated workshops, they produced either theatrical productions, group dances or painted murals that gave a creative expression to their experiences.

As social scientists, we tend to think about validity as a property of knowledge. The creative arts have not conventionally been seen as compatible with producing this. Valid knowledge entails the rigour of a systematic, scientific approach. But the 'Moving with Risk' approach calls certain aspects of this view into question. A scientific epistemology that attempts to separate subjective emotions from objective truth appears dubious in this context where the research explores what are profoundly sensitive and emotive experiences of traumatic events. Understanding the lived experience of displacement is not reducible to a series of events and life decisions, as there is also a need to connect to the emotional truths that are intimately bound to these. Yet

emotive memories around life traumas are not easy to express, especially in the context of a research interview with a stranger. The researchers used the creative arts precisely for their power to enable people to access and express emotions.

But in the research process, emotions were not taken as simply moving in one direction. Hearing people's stories also provoked strong emotions among the research team. For instance, Teresa tells me how the team would each reflect on what they felt they had learnt from the stories shared with them. She gives an example, describing how 'after interviewing one lady, we wrote down that we had learnt of how much she cared for her family and how strong she has been to keep the family together and put the children before her. As people we learnt that from them – as people we were touched by this'. Rather than trying to remain detached observers, the context demanded that they connect to the emotions being opened up to them. Viviana also emphasizes the importance of having trained psychologists as part of the team: 'You cannot just be bringing up these emotions and then say "see you later, go home"'. In utilizing arts as a methodological tool there was a need to make sure that emotions were processed and channelled responsibly.

Teresa explains another aspect of their choice of approach: 'Through using creative arts, they [participants] could express the stories they wanted to tell in a way they had control over. They could express what was important to them from these traumas – which allowed for a different conversation to take place around displacement'. This is significant given the way in which the voices of displaced people in Colombia are normally heard. Individuals have been called on to prove their displacement in order to access support or compensation from the state. To do so they face an interrogative process, which prompts them to crudely recount their stories of the violence in ways that reinforce their status as victims. Teresa noted how using the creative arts to express their stories in a new way had the potential to be empowering: 'It helped them seem not only victims of displacement, of arriving and living somewhere where there is risk, but that they are also capable. They have been really resourceful in managing this. In a way that was part of the ethical heart of the project, making them feel not victims but also as agents of change'.

The point to stress here is that using the creative arts was about more than building knowledge of their trajectories of risk. It was also about working collaboratively to find ways to build their capacity to cope with risks they continue to face. In part, this was achieved through a 'psychosocial' approach of helping individuals process and come to terms with the intense traumas they had lived through. Viviana described how for some this process seemed almost cathartic, while for others it had a less immediate impact. At a community level, they were able to present their collective murals, dances or theatre pieces to a public audience that included representatives of local and national authorities. These artistic workshops were also combined with legal training and capacity building for community mobilization. Together these activities are helping to build a more productive dialogue between these communities and authorities, where before there was disengagement.

All of which brings us back to the concept of validity. I brought up earlier how the creative arts were used to connect with emotions in a way that expanded conventional ideas of valid knowledge. But their approach draws on a notion of valid social research that goes beyond its relation to knowledge outputs. They make a compelling case that validity resides in part in what our participants get more directly out of the research process. In this way ethics was more than just an obligatory consideration; it was at the very heart of their research approach. As Teresa makes clear: 'we are not just extracting information. They are getting something out of that process as well. That is at the core of why we think using the arts is important. It allows us and the people we work with to get something out of it'. It invites researchers to more seriously ask: According to whom is this research valid? What are the participants' experiences of the research? Do they see any benefits?

As social researchers, we want our work to bring about positive change for those individuals and communities we work with. This is conventionally seen to come through the indirect impact of the knowledge we create on influencing policy or institutional practices. But often we overlook how the most direct impact we have arises out of participants' experience of the research process. The 'Moving with Risk' project foregrounds how when we think about what counts as valid research, we should also be more seriously considering how our research affects its participants – not just in minimising potential harm, but in bringing real benefits. Validity here is broadened to be an ethical matter as much as it is epistemological. Moreover, their work demonstrates how the expressive, transformative potential of creative arts makes for a powerful tool social research can employ in striving to achieve this end.
