

Acknowledging privilege through encounters with difference: Participatory Learning and Action techniques for decolonising methodologies in Southern contexts

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Abstract

Participatory Action and Learning (PLA) research techniques can contribute to decolonising methodologies by alerting participants to privilege and marginalisation through encounters across difference. Consciousness of privileges is often obscured and naturalised as part of normative expectations of everyday living. This paper contends that no one is exempt from interrogating their positionality and their beliefs, and that PLA research techniques can provide the means by which people can be confronted with privileges and marginality through encountering the 'other'. A case study conducted across Higher Education Institutions in South Africa is presented to show how PLA techniques can make a substantial contribution to processes of research. The case study shows how PLA research techniques make it possible to bring people together to confront differential privileges, thus giving people the opportunity to become both insiders and committed outsiders in their interactions across differences.

Key words

Participatory Learning and Action research techniques; privilege, marginalisation, positionality, insiders and committed outsiders

Coming to terms with very little is no recipe for social justice. It is, I believe, quite justifiable for those not thoroughly imbued with the inegalitarian norms of a culture to come forth as constructive critics of these norms. But critics originating from outside of a culture need not be distant or detached. They are much more likely to come up with helpful and relevant criticism if they find out as much as they can about the culture and the meanings of its practices and differential allocations of resources from its members themselves. Understanding these people's own perceptions of their situations is extremely important. But the aim of this endeavour, in cases where serious inequalities exist, should not be simply to understand, but rather to do so with a view to politicising the deprived so that they can begin to ask new questions about their cultural norms, with a view to improving their situation. Given this proviso, then, *committed* outsiders may often be better analysts and critics of social justice than those who live within the relevant culture. And what they might well do, as part of their constructive criticism, is to try to encourage those within the culture to think about some of its oppressive, or at least questionable, practices from various points of view, including that of the least advantaged (Okin1995:292-293).

In the above quote, Okin (1995) addresses ethical concerns about the justifiability of what she terms a '*committed outsider*' in the research process constructively critiquing the inegalitarian norms of a culture. She assumes the moral stand that the act of critiquing is a justifiable practice and, furthermore, that it is a responsibility of the '*committed outsider*' in research to encourage those who are within the culture to consider how some practices may be regarded as oppressive or questionable. This viewpoint is similar to Amartya Sen's (1995) critique of a '*small mercies*' mentality, where disadvantaged groups of people are inclined to be grateful for the '*small mercies*' or hand-outs they receive because they have internalised views of themselves as not deserving anything more, and because they have adjusted their desires to their deprived status, which they assume is natural. It also resonates with Martha Nussbaum's (1995) critique of the relativism of postmodern ideas that eulogise local views or perspectives as '*authentic*', without offering a substantial critique of how oppressive various practices are for groups of people within such situations. Nussbaum argues that it is justifiable for her, as a Western academic concerned with moral issues, to comment about cultural practices that disadvantage certain groups of people while privileging others. Both Nussbaum (1995; 2000) and Sen (1984; 1995) point out that cultural traditions often pose obstacles to human flourishing: when, for example, women are portrayed as less important and less deserving of life support than men. Race, gender and generation influence access to opportunities and resources such as food, care, education and paid employment. For example, women are denied access to education and employment opportunities, all in the name of culture and tradition.

In research processes, these sorts of inequalities are often not perceived to be problematic and may be endorsed by those who are either advantaged or disadvantaged by them. It is therefore important for people to interrogate notions of justice and injustice in the light of these inequalities. Although insiders in research are best placed in terms of understanding cultural norms, they do not always have access to positions of criticality in relation to these norms. The perspectives of outsiders in research are perhaps useful in these circumstances in that they are able to bring an external perspective to the situation (Jaggar, 2000; Nussbaum 1995; Sen 1995).

In this article I put forward a view which is sympathetic to that of Okin's notion of a committed outsider – the necessity of some form of mediating person, text or artefact for engagement with criticality in order to interrogate one's own position in the research process (Vygotsky, 1962;1978). I examine the extent to which Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) research techniques, as part of the more general Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, are able to provide such affordances of mediation which could lead to a criticality of one's own positionality. In order to consider this, I use a case study where taken-for-granted assumptions about privilege and marginality were reflected upon across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) . In this case study, university students who were differently placed as a result of social inequities in South Africa were given the opportunity of engaging with each other across HEIs using PLA techniques. Furthermore, I contend that it is not only positions of disadvantage that should be the focus of decolonizing methodologies –privileged positions should also be included in this focus

(Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) is also sympathetic to this view). Finally, I consider ways in which to facilitate responsibility for privilege and how acknowledgement of privileges could be deliberated upon through PLA research techniques.

Participatory and Learning Techniques

Participatory action research (PAR) was initiated and developed in Africa and South America in the 1970s by third world activists and academics. The participatory research paradigm emphasises social investigation, education, and action, with the ultimate goal of the improvement of the lives of those who are involved in the research process (Yeich and Levine 1992). Issues are examined from political, social and economic perspectives (Freire 1970; Hall 1979; Mies 1983; Maguire 1987; Mbilinyi 1993; Tandon 1981).

Participatory research starts from a critique of dominant ideologies which place the blame for problems such as poverty or racism on the persons involved rather than on social structures or the behaviour of dominant groups. It aims to undermine the patterns that make members of oppressed groups identify with this ideology and see themselves as being responsible for their own situations of personal deficit. Through the process of participation in the research process, participants begin to view their situations from alternative perspectives (Hall 1979; 1981; Maguire 1987; Mbilinyi 1993; Mies 1983). This view of knowledge in the participatory research paradigm articulates well with the arguments of Okin (1995), Sen (1995), Nussbaum (1995) and Jaggar (2000) discussed at the outset of this article, in that they all assume that those who are marginalised have internalised discursive practices which naturalise their disadvantaged positions.

Another important aspect of the participatory research process is the transfer of skills to those involved in the process. Through people's participation in the research process they are enabled to learn what has previously been the domain of 'expert' or 'professional' knowledge, such as how to apply research techniques.

Participatory research techniques provide opportunities to reduce or redress the subject-object disparity in traditional forms of research (Healy, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; Vodde and Galant, 2002). It combines research goals with action goals (Healy, 2000).

PLA techniques have been described by Robert Chambers as a 'growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours to enable people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions and to plan, act and monitor, evaluate and reflect' (Chambers 2006:3). The techniques involve the use of open-ended, flexible visual learning methods, which I argue have the potential to provide a useful tool for decolonising methodologies in Southern contexts. Common techniques include visioning, mapping, transect walks, mood lines, one way and two way matrices, impact diagrams, problem and objective trees and proportional piling (time/resource allocations) (see sources such as Pretty, Guijt, Scoones & Thompson, (1994) and the Institute for Development Studies website <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/> for a comprehensive review of PLA techniques).

Decolonising methodologies

One of the first postcolonial writers to examine cultural racism and recognise its pervasive effects on the black psyche was the Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his classic 'Black Skins, White Masks' (1986). His work has been further developed by postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said (1978), Homi Bhabha (1994), Gayatri Spivak (1992) and Chandra Mohanty (1991; 2003). These writers were committed to a decolonisation and critique of the normativity of European and American forms of knowledge. As post-colonial theorists, they have each contributed to ideas of how colonial discourse has constructed the Orient, Africa and the so-called Third World.

Susan Okin's piece is provocative in the light of decolonizing methodologies in its contestation of the idea that only people who have experienced oppressive material and cultural circumstances are suitable candidates to critique their own situations. This assumption, which leads to the belief that, for example, indigenous populations are necessarily able to view their situations from a 'wide-angled' perspective, is claimed in some of the writings on decolonizing methodologies (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2008; Dunbar, 2008) and implicit in others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Graham, 2002; Kovach, 2009). As is alluded to above in the discussion about Patricia Hill Collins (1991) this view is similar to that of feminist and Marxist standpoint positions which view those who are in marginalized positions as having a double consciousness – one of their own marginality of the oppressor's world (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1998; Hekman, 1999; Mies, 1983). Patricia Hill Collins (1991) has also contributed to debate on the insider-outsider status and the significance that this has for methodological concerns in research. She argued that it is possible for black women intellectuals to make creative use of what she terms their 'outsider within' status, by which she means their awareness of their own marginality. Hill Collins (1991:36) posits the idea that bringing black feminist intellectuals, who she takes to be those who share an outsider-within status, to the centre of sociology, will bring to the fore 'aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches'.

While it may be possible that one's marginalised status gives one a more encompassing view of the world in the research process than that possessed by those in a dominant position, this is not always or necessarily the case. Moreover, identity and experience in and of themselves do not necessarily lead to a particular consciousness, or to an unmasking of power relations. It is also necessary to have access to alternative oppositional or alternative counter-hegemonic discourses which provide vocabularies for reflexivity in order to reflect critically on one's own circumstances (Foucault, 1988).

In many accounts of the effects of forms of colonisation on African and American peoples, there is a tendency to ignore the agency and differential positionings of indigenous people or to portray them as victims (Kallaway, 2002). The tendency to attribute authenticity to valorised representations of black women only as victims of suffering and marginalisation without reference to their work as active agents in addressing their needs in particularised local settings has been critiqued by writers such as Chandra Mohanty (1991; 2003), Reynolds (2002) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). These authors have argued against the use of simplistic, essentialised notions and have recognized

heterogeneity, complexity and the contradictory aspects of Southern contexts. However in those writings about decolonizing methodologies which employ standpoint theories, the West is treated as homogeneous and other. In this way all forms of western knowledge including those employing criticality, such as feminism and poststructuralism are lumped into one category. Mohanty (1991) does however, make it clear that middle class urban women in Southern contexts can make as many homogenizing and erroneous assumptions about their working class rural sisters, as Western women can make about third world women as abject victims.

Post-Aboriginalists such as Harrison (2004) and McConaghy (2000) have also sought to develop critiques of Aboriginalism's essentialist discourses and repressive dichotomies or dualisms between groups of people. Grossman (2003) and those that contribute to her edited volume on critical writing by Indigenous Australians deconstructs essentialist models of identity and examines contested politics of who defines meaningful and authentic Indigenous knowledges and practices. In order to overcome these problematic conceptions of oversimplified essentialised constructions of fixed positions of oppression, the notion of positionality alerts us to the idea that we all occupy positions of privilege and disadvantage depending on the context in which we find ourselves. Nobody is immune from dominant hegemonic discourses and in order to become aware of these, one needs some form of mediation -whether from engagement with more knowledgeable peers, or critical texts or encounters across difference, which would serve to provide a stimulus to become critically reflexive about taken for granted assumptions and oppressive practices. Linda Tuhiwari Smith (1999) proposes that indigenous research approaches recognize that there are multiple ways of being an insider and outsider in research and that it is important for insiders to become reflexive and critical in their practice. Brah (1992) observed some time ago that careful political analyses cannot be substituting by claims of authenticity and minority membership. Graham Smith (1997) too, has observed that critical theory and a decolonising methodology is useful for analyzing power differences between groups of people and providing hope for transformation.

Linda Tuhiwari Smith (1999) purports that indigenous research approaches recognize that there are multiple ways of being an insider and outsider in research and that it is important for insiders to become reflexive and critical in their practice. In this paper, I examine the extent to which Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) techniques allow research participants as insiders to become reflexive and critical in their practice. In particular, I examine the benefits of bringing participants together who are differently placed with regard to privileges to confront these and to engage in conversations with each other about them. This leads to an enlarged perspective on the world and a more compassionate and critical appreciation of the other, all of which are desired attributes of PAR approaches (Chambers, 2006; Hall, 1981).

In addition to the ways in which identities across northern and southern contexts are essentialised, current neoliberal discourses of diversity are made docile in that they tend to wash out power relations regarding difference as neutral and value free. Matus&Infante (2011) alert us to how, in the discourses of diversity used by HEIs in Chile,

the normalising of groups and identities leads to the unproblematical correlation between identities and people's experiences and practices. Furthermore, social inequities are naturalised in that what is regarded as normal is not problematised and issues of privilege and discrimination not dealt with. In order to think about how people manage to deny their privileges, a useful concept is Joan Tronto's (1993) notion of 'privileged irresponsibility'.

Privileged irresponsibility

As Swigonski (1996) notes, privileges make people feel at home in the world and take for granted that they are the centre of their world where social, political, economic and other resources are available. Exclusion, on the other hand, de-centres or marginalises individuals who have less access to such resources. Joan Tronto's (1993) notion of privileged irresponsibility alerts us to the fact that those in a position of racial/gendered/generational privilege benefit from and make use of the services of the other, who meets their needs. Those privileged by racial, generational and gendered markers neither recognise nor take responsibility for their own privileges or the other's lack of such privileges. From this perspective it is possible to see how those who have privileges as a consequence of institutional arrangements may not recognise that they pursue their own ends in the world because others are there to meet their needs. For example, men's, adults, or Whites' privileged irresponsibility is dependent on the backgrounding (Plumwood, 1983) by these groups of their dependence upon people servicing their needs. For example, domestic workers in South Africa service the needs of women and men who can pursue careers and have their houses cleaned and their children looked after.

In the first section of this article, I proposed that people do not always have access to the ways in which their lives may be considered privileged or marginalized through their identities and that it is necessary for people to interrogate their positionalities and taken-for-granted assumptions regarding privilege and marginality. In the next section, I consider the extent to which JPLA techniques can address issues of inequality and social injustice in Southern contexts where there is a legacy of the impact of colonisation. I use as an example a participatory action research project across differently placed higher education institutions (HEIs) which have been affected by the apartheid legacy in South Africa. I examine the usefulness of PLA techniques to make students from these different HEIs to encounter differences and write about these differences themselves. I focus on how students came to realisations of privilege through encountering the other. I consider the necessity of thinking about responsibilities in relation to privilege. I argue that PLA techniques can provide some impetus for addressing issues of social injustices, but that in themselves they are not sufficient as what Foucault (1988:155) would term 'exercises of freedom', in that they do not go far enough in developing a critical imagination required to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions in the research process.

Using PLA techniques for Students in Higher Education

In considering the potential of PLA to address decolonisation, it is not enough to list the principles and tools, but also necessary to examine the concrete contexts where the techniques are used and nuances in these in the research process (Jones & SPEECH,

2001). For this reason, I will use a case study of a participatory action research project to develop my argument that PLA tools make a contribution towards a decolonising methodology, to address issues of social justice in postcolonial settings.

A central concern currently in South Africa is the importance of transforming relations between students from Historically Advantaged (HAIs) and Historically Disadvantaged (HDIs) Higher Education Institutions and between different professions which are differentially placed in terms of status recognition, and in terms of access to resources.

With these concerns in mind, a group of educators met to develop a participatory action research project to deliberate upon the best possible pedagogical practices to engage students across differences of profession and institution. Learners studying at HDIs come from relatively privileged sectors of society, with access to better secondary schooling education and literate parents as well as other privileges and resources than their counterparts at HAIs. In order to deal with these inequitable relations of power, it was decided in the participatory action research project, we would use PLA techniques which were regarded as a suitable modality for learners to begin their engagement with each other. It was anticipated that due to their differing academic literacy skills, engaging immediately in writing exercises would disadvantage those from the HDI, thus privileging the group of students who were already in positions of relative privilege. Furthermore it was assumed that engaging in PLA experiential exercises – in both drawing and reflecting their communities and life trajectories would lead to more participatory parity between learners from different professions and institutions. Participatory parity, a concept which Nancy Fraser (1997; 2003) uses, refers to ability to participate in an equitable way as full partners in interaction with others. We anticipated that this would happen, as the privileged group of students would be in a situation of learners from those who had experienced greater levels of discrimination.

Students between HDIs and HDAs have very few opportunities of interacting with each other, due to apartheid legacies of geographical separation which continue to affect interactional patterns of communication in contemporary South Africa (see Bozalek et al., 2010; Rohleder et.al, 2008 for more details on the research project). In providing learners with opportunities to work collaboratively on the themes of community, self and identity, it was hoped that they would be able to become more aware of differences and inequitable economic, social, political and cultural structures and practices. It was also hoped that the process of doing, deliberating and dialoguing would create opportunities to become aware of and interrogate power relations, and that this in itself would have an empowering effect.

Participatory action research was originally and still remains concerned with the relationship between knowledge/power. We considered PLA techniques to be a useful research tool for a number of reasons. Firstly, the techniques allowed learners to consider issues of where they have been placed in relation to resources and the privilege and harm emerging from their positioning in relation to resources in the light of their own experiences. Secondly, students were given the opportunity to interrogate the point of view of their everyday social practices by engaging in PLA techniques, dialoguing in

virtual and face-to-face environments with their peers. Connecting the effects of prejudice and oppression along lines of race, class, and gender to students' own lives has also been found to be beneficial by educational writers such as Wolk (2003). He set high school students the task of writing up their experiences of these forms of prejudice in what he termed 'social justice notebooks'. He also provided opportunities in the classroom situation for students to share their experiences. Since one of the major goals of having students engage in the PLA exercises is for them to come to the realisation that it is possible to occupy contradictory positions of privilege and disadvantage, the process of PLA in class and then the interactions around this in the virtual environment with each other would have the effect of realising this goal. In the section that follows I give some indication of the sorts of comments that students made in their reflections on the PLA techniques and their interactions with each other. The students' responses indicate their awareness of their own positions in encountering 'the other' - which are important for eliciting knowledge regarding power relations in decolonizing methodologies and participatory action research approaches.

Students from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) (the HDI referred to earlier) and Stellenbosch University (SU) (the HAI referred to earlier) came together on three occasions for face-to-face workshops, in between which they interacted with each other in small groups on a virtual learning management system platform. At the first workshop they were introduced to PLA techniques and they were placed in inter-institutional and interdisciplinary groups of six students (there were approximately 95 students in each year that the Community, Self and Identity course was run). Students were requested to draw a map of their neighbourhood and their home indicating the resources that were available and then explaining what they would like to change in their environment. The following quotes from students indicated the effects of practicing PLA techniques in a situation where they had to interact with other students across a multiplicity of differences.

Some students indicated that they found the techniques to be a good way to establish immediate contact with their peers from other disciplines and institutions who they had not met before. PLA techniques also provoked reflection and the opportunity for hearing the comments of others on their situations. They reported that the face-to-face meeting and discussion of the Community Maps had a profound impact on them:

Students were also able to see how their situations differed markedly from each other and recognize their differential privileged situations. This had significant effects; particularly on White students who lived in communities with abundant resources were confronted with their peers who, due to colonial and apartheid legacies were living in situations which were quite different. Because of continued geographical separation due to geographical apartheid, these students lived in monocultural situations, rarely mixing across HEIs even though they are situated close to each other (30 kilometers in distance). The following were some of the reflections by students after experiencing the PLA community mapping exercise:

I was extremely aware, as I was sharing my picture, of the well-resourced context in which I live. Not only is my own background privileged, but so is the community in which I have chosen to live. Talking about the relative abundance of resources in my community evoked feelings of guilt. My picture was in very stark contrast to those of most of my group members who come largely from communities where not-enoughness is the norm. What was so humbling was that their responses and questions were accepting, respectful and in no way indicted me. (White Stellenbosch Psychology female student)

I reflect today and as I did at the workshop, I found this to be a particularly difficult task, as I realised that I had intense feelings of shame and guilt about my more privileged background and current situation.

Reflecting on my community map, I see a beautiful, privileged and well resourced community. There are exquisite hills surrounded by well kept houses. There are two newly painted parks, a shopping centre included in which are a food shop, restaurants, a hairdresser, an estate and travel agent, an optometrist, and a chemist. There are various doctors rooms and a newly build gym and health centre, in addition to all these resources there is another shopping centre, a college, a school and a hospital just across the road. When I was drawing my community map I consciously asked myself, Should I include all the resources, I find at my leisure, as I felt a sense of guilt (White Stellenbosch Psychology female student)

As can be seen from the above reflections of students, their exposure to the disparities of their living conditions made them begin to interrogate their privileged positions, and many of them had emotional reactions of guilt and shame. They anticipated rejection from the UWC students and were surprised when these students showed acceptance towards them. Below are some of the maps which Stellenbosch students drew. In these maps the abundance of resources is apparent and the gated villages in which students live due to the fear of housebreaking and criminal activity is also apparent.



Figure 1. In the above community map, an abundance of resources is apparent – both private and state hospitals, a rape crisis clinic, shops, trees, parks, hotels, restaurants, golf courses, a spa, a school, restaurants, etc.

The community maps are useful research techniques in that they elicited strong emotional responses from students and provided an opportunity for genuine conversations about deeply contentious issues, which would not have been possible just by getting students together across institutions. The discussions about how students still occupy positions of privilege in the post-apartheid era, was made possible through the discussions of their community maps and through examining their own positions in relation to those of their peers.



Figure 2. The above community map shows a well-resourced farm with fruit and vineyards, a windmill, a vegetable garden, a dam, cattle, sheep, horse stables and cultivated land.

In the same way, through the community mapping research exercise, UWC students were acutely conscious of the lack of resources in their communities compared to those of their SU peers. They were aware of the continuing legacy of apartheid and its affects on the crime, poverty, lack of basic facilities such as electricity, housing, toilets and water. Below are some of the reflections of UWC students on the PLA exercises:

The scarcity of recreational facilities can lead to an uprise in criminal activities. If the youth is not intellectually or physically stimulated it means that they will be tempted to look for entertainment elsewhere. Hence the popularity of “shebeens” (an illegal establishment that sells mainly liquor but can also sell drugs, which is mostly situated in the residential areas of these communities) in lower socio-economic communities. This was aptly portrayed in one of the maps where the person’s house is situated next to such an establishment (Black UWC social work female student).

Another problem which is shown clearly in the maps is the lack of housing in our communities and the effect it has on South Africa.. Government housing is yet another issue for the lower socio-economic societies. These houses are built fairly fast and are very small and uncomfortable. The houses in my own community are so small and comprise of only one room and one toilet. The toilet does not have a door which leads to a spread in diseases. Whole families live in these matchboxes

and have to make due with the lack of facilities in the house. There is more often that not, no running water inside the house, no baths and no electricity. The government cannot provide baths because they need to keep the space that the houses occupy as small as possible and the electricity is only connected once the new owners pay to get it connected. This means that if they do not have money to connect it, they will have no electricity. A more pressing problem is the socio-economic problems that arise when people are forced to squat together in such a small space. Children that are inevitably exposed to the sexual behaviour of their parents, heightened sibling rivalry, etc. (UWC black female social work student)

As I was sharing my river of life, meaning the easy and hard times of my life, one of my group member felt attached and emotional about my story because there were times that I used to sleep without food and wake up next morning with nothing and I will go to school without any lunch box. This was the part of difficulties in my life, but I never gave up.(UWC black female social work student)

These stories were typical ones of UWC students which exemplified their experiences of living in communities which were severely under resourced and had many social problems as a result of forced removals and other apartheid policies and practices. The community mapping exercise allowed them to examine their own positions of inequality which continued to affect them in the post apartheid context.

Below are some examples of community maps drawn by UWC students:



Figure 3. The above map depicting an urban community in Cape Town shows the social problems in the community – substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, overcrowded clinics, lack of housing, unemployment, a shebeen which is an illegal tavern and alcohol abuse.

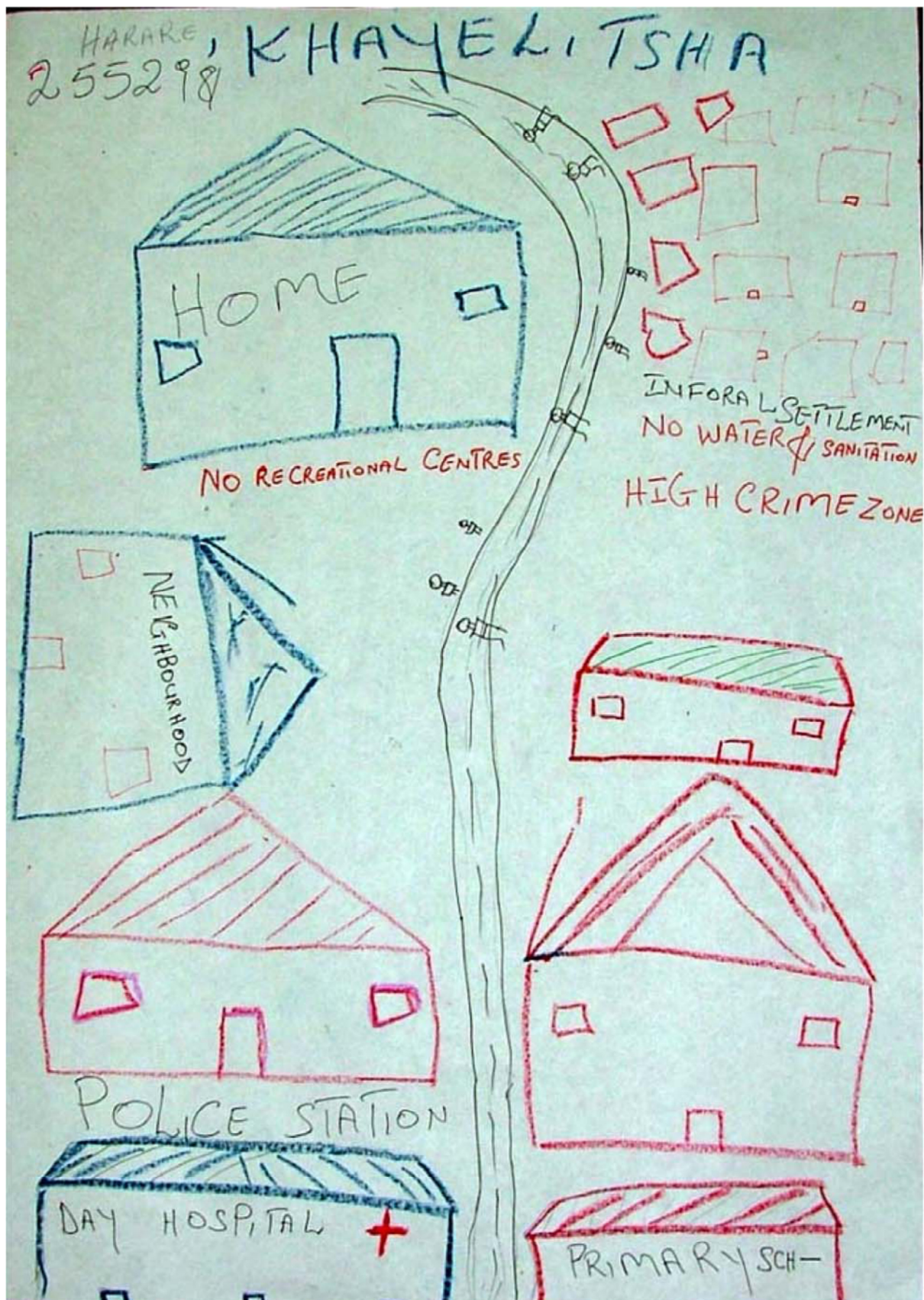


Figure 4. The above map shows an urban township Khayelitsha, in Cape Town – here there are no recreational facilities, no water or sanitation and a high crime rate.

The students were thus able to relate to each others' circumstances and how they were positioned in relation to their own resources and trajectories, and evaluate this against those of their peers. In this relational research exercise of sharing their drawings and stories, students were able to acquire a richer understanding of power relations on both an experiential and conceptual level. The PLA exercises enabled students to gain access to knowledges that had previously been obfuscated due to apartheid geography and its subsequent effects. A degree of participatory parity in the classroom was achieved in that students appeared to have to come to respect their own abilities as learners and co-creators of knowledge. Some students presented papers on their experiences of taking part in the course and later wrote an article which was published in a South African higher education journal (Rohleder et al., 2007).

The Value of the PLA exercises for reflecting on privilege

Through their encounters with each other using PLA techniques, students were confronted with their current living situations which were patently different due to historical conditions in South Africa. Had these students not had the experience of engaging in this activity, those who came from well-resourced communities probably would have continued in their positions of 'privileged irresponsibility' - not noticing how privileged they were and unaware that others were living in very different circumstances. On the other hand, students who were living with few resources and many social problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, would not have been so acutely aware of their relative deprivation in relation to their more privileged peers. The value of PLA research techniques in facilitating the interaction of students with each other by talking about their drawings is important to note. It is doubtful whether students would have engaged in such deep encounters revealing their experiences without the community maps. Davidson (2004) refers to the *decentring* of the academic self as a useful **pedagogic tool** for critical reflection and examining and interrogating assumptions through engagement across difference. Decentring the self assumes recognition that the self is made up of multiple narratives or stories (Davidson 2004:306). The PLA research exercises made it possible for senior undergraduate social work, occupational therapy and psychology students across historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions engage in criticality and the decentring of the academic selves of by providing opportunities to engage each other's narratives and professional discourses.

Conclusion

Through engaging in PLA research techniques, students were able to develop insights into their own and each others' experiences and stories. PLA research techniques thus allowed students to acquire a richer understanding of power relations on both an experiential and conceptual level. Through the research exercises, they were able to gain access to knowledges that had previously been obfuscated due to apartheid geography and its subsequent effects. Students appeared to have to come to respect their own abilities as learners and co-creators of knowledge through the use of PLA techniques.

In relation to their position as students engaged in PLA exercises which depict their own circumstances, UWC and Stellenbosch University (SU) students are positioned as both *insiders* and *outsiders* they are, to use Hill Collins' term, 'outsiders-within'. As *insiders* they had a close understanding of cultural practices and the resources of their own communities and they were thus in an excellent position understand the practices of their own situations and of the circumstances in which they have lived. As *committedoutsiders* they were able to make critical evaluations of their own and their peers circumstances, especially through encounters with the other which made the wider socio-cultural circumstances apparent through the PLA research techniques. The PLA techniques provided the possibilities of encounter with the other for engagement with criticality in order to interrogate students own positions (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978). These opportunities are important to develop alternative knowledges, especially in contexts such as South Africa, which has separated living, working and studying conditions across race and class. PLA research techniques are one way of giving people the opportunity to view their situations from an insider and outsider position and to develop a compassionate and enlarged view of the world. The data which are drawn from such encounters can contribute to the interrogation of the legitimacy of hegemonic knowledge claims from rich discussions emanating from the concrete lives of others.

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