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Article

Youth Are Not All the Same: On the Appropriateness and Limits of Participatory Methods in Youth Research

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Abstract: The field of youth studies has traditionally promoted participatory methods, assuming that young people prefer creativity over standard methods like traditional ethnography or one-to-one interviews. However, my experience in Medellín, Colombia, reveals complications. While youth with strong ties to civil society and activism found comfort in participatory methods, youth who were out of school or in conflict with the law felt alienated by formalized processes and institutional spaces. Too often, participatory techniques homogenize youth perspectives, taking the views of socially engaged youth as representative of all youth. Researchers should instead acknowledge diverse youth experiences and employ different methods for different youth groups.

Keywords: youth; participatory research; participatory filmmaking; ethnography; marginalization; activism

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1. Introduction

Since its inception, the field of childhood and youth studies has seen a strong push for adopting participatory research methods. This push is often grounded in the assumption that young people are more comfortable with creative, group-based processes than with traditional, conversation-based methods like interviews or ethnography. Consequently, tools such as participatory photography, participatory filmmaking, participatory mapping, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) have become the "golden standard" in research involving children and youth.

Drawing on my direct experience conducting both participatory and traditional ethnographic research with adolescents and youth in and around Medellín, Colombia, in this paper, I argue that using participatory methods with young people is not without complications. After analyzing the literature on the emergence of participatory research in childhood and youth studies, I discuss empirical data from two different projects in which I used participatory filmmaking as a research tool to explore young people's experiences of peace and violence. These research experiences highlight that participatory methods attracted some young people while alienating others. On the one hand, youth with strong ties to activism and civil society found comfort in the organized, structured group work that participatory methodologies entail. On the other hand, marginalized youth—such as those out of school or in conflict with the law—were apprehensive about engaging in the formalized processes and institutional spaces where participatory research is often conducted. For these individuals, the more informal and flexible approach of traditional ethnographic research, grounded in one-to-one or small group conversations and participant observation, proved

to be much more effective and aligned with their customary ways of socializing and expressing themselves.

All in all, in this paper, I argue that participatory techniques can present a barrier to participation for individuals who lack a clear agenda that they wish to express. The institutionalized, formalized, and group-based nature of participatory research can be poorly suited to engage young people whose lived experiences bring forward illegal, taboo, or sensitive issues. While participatory techniques stem from a genuine desire to reduce power imbalances between young people and adults in knowledge production, they also risk "homogenizing" the youth population, assuming that the views expressed by socially engaged youth are representative of all youth. Consequently, participatory techniques may inadvertently reinforce mainstream views while silencing the perspectives of marginalized youth.

Youth are not all the same, and no single research technique can adequately capture the views of the entire youth population. Instead, researchers should carefully consider the specific youth population they aim to understand and adopt research methods that are appropriate to engage with them effectively.

2. The Rise of Participatory Research in Childhood and Youth Studies

In the second half of the 20th century, the field of childhood and youth studies shifted from focusing on young people's physical and mental growth to studying young people in context. Anthropologists have critically challenged international laws and policies which treat the category of "child" as monolithic (James 2007, p. 262), emphasizing instead the importance of context in shaping childhood experiences (Lancy 2008). Children thus came to be viewed not merely as adults in the making, but as subjects worthy of study in their own right (James and Prout 1997; James et al. 1998; Wells 2009), and empirical research increasingly prioritized their direct perspectives (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, p. 241). This implies not simply capturing children's concerns, but rather "exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives can provide" (James 2007, p. 262). In turn, this has inspired a shift "from research *about* children to research *with* them" (Argañaraz Gomez and Aufseeser 2024, p. 231 [emphasis added])—a shift which also inspired the then-emerging field of youth studies.

This profound epistemological shift also necessitated a methodological adjustment, leading to the increased use of research methods labeled as "participatory" within the field of childhood and youth studies. While these methods encompass a range of diverse techniques, including photovoice, participatory filmmaking, participatory walks, and Participatory Action Research, all of them share an emphasis on enhancing participants' ability to actively influence the research process. Participatory approaches view participants not only as sources of information, but also as active agents in shaping the research questions, design, analysis, and outputs. In other words, participatory methods imply a redistribution of power from the researcher to the participants. Many of these methods also include an "action" component, meaning the research aims not only to produce knowledge, but also to directly improve the conditions and practices of those participating (El Mallah 2024, p. 981).

The use of participatory methods has seen a steep rise in the field of childhood and youth studies in recent years, with a large majority of studies published after 2009 (systematic review by Anyon et al. 2018, p. 868). In the literature, participatory approaches have been largely celebrated for contributing to the "democratization of knowledge" (Batallan et al. 2017) and for "redistribut[ing] power within the research process" (Cahill 2007, p. 297). They have also been lauded for "giving children and youth a voice"—a highly problematic discourse, as it implies that these interlocutors had "no voice" before the researcher arrived (see James 2007). Two large systematic reviews praise the positive

outcomes of youth participatory research, showing how this approach increases social justice awareness and social and cognitive development; promotes youth self-perception as change agents; and supports stronger relationships between youth, adults, and the broader community (Shamrova and Cummings 2017), as well as enhancing youth agency, leadership skills, and social and academic competence (Anyon et al. 2018).

A major limitation of these celebratory accounts is that they fail to discuss the different ways in which participatory methods are attuned—or not—to various groups of youth. Participatory approaches have been used to conduct research with very different subgroups of youth in the Anglo-Saxon world, including out-of-school youth in Scotland, U.K. (Fox 2013), street-involved youth (Funk et al. 2012), spiritual tobacco users (Jardine and James 2012), and homeless youth in Canada (Kennelly 2018); Hispanic youth in New England, U.S. (El Mallah 2024); homeless youth in Los Angeles, U.S. (Garcia et al. 2014); young migrant Latina women in Baltimore, U.S. (Argañaraz Gomez and Aufseeser 2024); social justice activists in Salt Lake City, U.S. (Quijada Cerecer et al. 2013); and trans and gender non-conforming youth of color in New York, U.S. (Marx and Regan 2021).

Over the past two decades, participatory approaches have also become widespread in Latin America (see Leal 2009), where they connect with locally emerged and decolonial theories like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1968), which made a radical case for co-creation in knowledge production and transfer. While participatory approaches in the region are more commonly applied in community-based settings than in youth- or children-focused ones, examples of participatory research with youth abound. These include, for example, schooled youth in Montevideo, Uruguay (Machado et al. 2023) and Córdoba, Argentina (Paulín et al. 2012); indigenous youth in the Amazon, Colombia (Riveros Jiménez and Marroquín Yerovi 2019), Chiapas, Mexico (Reartes 2019), and Veracruz, Mexico (Sandoval Rivera 2017); and vulnerable youth in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Llobet et al. 2024).[1]

However, few of these studies discuss why and how participatory methods have worked well—or not—with the specific sub-groups of youth being researched. Much of this research operates under the general assumption that these are "youth-friendly" activities and approaches (e.g., LoIacono Merves et al. 2015), assuming that they will be appropriate for, and yield meaningful results about, the general youth population. Yet, the groups that participatory research engages with are, by nature, very small, meaning that findings can hardly be generalized.

Sometimes, the labels used are also misleading. For instance, Iwasaki et al. (2015) state in the title of their article that they engaged in Participatory Action Research with "high-risk, marginalized youth", only to reveal in the body of the text that their interlocutors were, in fact, "youth leaders" within marginalized communities—which is a very different group of interlocutors than marginalized youth in marginalized communities. Similarly, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2018) highlight that the returns of participatory research are "greater for vulnerable children", without specifying which kinds of vulnerable children they are referring to, nor acknowledging that different vulnerabilities may require very different research approaches. As Powers and Tiffany (2006, p. 86) emphasize, "a wide range of youth (not just youth who are "stars") should be engaged"; yet, there is little discussion of how researchers can vary their research approaches to engage these different types of youth.

Uncritical enthusiasm for participatory approaches is also perpetuated in policy and practice circles. For example, a 193-page Save the Children manual (Boyden and Ennew 1997) advocates for the importance of participatory research with children without differentiating among types of children, and without acknowledging that some children subgroups may not be well suited to these methods. A paper from UNICEF's Research Office Innocenti (Auerswald et al. 2017) highlights that "disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or

marginalized adolescents"—such as migrants, sexual minorities, orphans, incarcerated youth, and homeless youth—are often excluded from research due to social factors like economic inequality, violence, stigma, and racism (ibid, p. 2). The paper goes on to suggests that community-based participatory research approaches should be employed to integrate this population into research (ibid, p. 6), without appreciating that these subgroups of adolescents are often stigmatized by their very communities, and as a result may feel uncomfortable in formalized, institutionalized, or community-based settings.

Certainly, there exists a more critical strand of literature that highlights some of the limits of participatory approaches, noting that meaningful participation is often difficult to achieve in practice. A systematic review (Jacquez et al. 2013), for instance, points out that, in many participatory projects, youth are not fully integrated into all aspects of the research as the participatory approach would require. Many, for example, are excluded from data analysis and output production, key aspects of research that tend to occur in different settings from the data-gathering process, thus making youth involvement more challenging. In participatory filmmaking processes, youth are often excluded from the editing phase due to a lack of skills. This means that researchers ultimately make the final decisions about which pieces of video material are selected for the final outputs, with clear implications for the ethics of representation (Kennelly 2018).

Another body of work has highlighted persistent power inequalities between adult researchers and participating youth. A systematic review by Kim (2016) outlines, for example, the limitations of participatory approaches in genuinely redressing power imbalances between researchers and research participants, and even the potential for causing harm through the research process. Indeed, participatory research is itself not free from the uneven power relationships it seeks to address (Tisdall 2021). As noted by Strocka (2008, p. 271), participatory research exists in a peculiar paradox: it constructs children as active "agents" of research, while simultaneously defining them as "powerless" and in need of "empowerment" through participation processes initiated by "powerful" experts.

A third set of critiques highlights the risk of participatory research being instrumentalized or tokenized, legitimizing research findings solely because they were achieved in a "participatory manner", without adequately discussing the extent to which participation was meaningful. As Teixeira et al. (2021, p. 151) have noted, "we risk tokenizing youth participation in a climate in which youth voice is sought but scholarly training and university support for participatory research is inconsistent". Expressions such as "using youth to research other youth" (Jardine and James 2012) exemplify this kind of tokenization. Kirshner (2010, p. 238) points out that the empowerment discourse "risks reinforcing essentialist conceptions of youth voice" (ibid, p. 242). Argañaraz Gomez and Aufseeser (2024, p. 232) highlight a need for "more discussion about impediments to collaborative research, including existing power relationships between researchers and children, as well as other obstacles that interfere in forging more democratic relationships".

While this critical literature is valuable in highlighting the shortcomings of participatory research, it does not question the inherent "goodness" and appropriateness of participatory approaches. Instead, it critiques the fact that these approaches often fail to practice what they preach. This literature discusses whether these approaches are correctly applied, but it does not question their suitability for particular sub-groups of youth.

This oversight is surprising, as anthropologists have long emphasized diversity in childhood, highlighting that what it means to be a child or youth is not merely a matter of age, but it is influenced by other factors, such as gender, race, socio-economic status, and socio-cultural settings (Green 2007, p. 97). Very few works have, however, unpacked what this diversity means for the research methods we choose, and particularly for the appropriateness of participatory approaches. Some youth can feel out of place, mocked, and unwelcome in participatory spaces (see Wattar et al. 2012). For instance, Fox (2013, p. 996),

who conducted research on school excursions in Scotland, noted how out-of-school youth "resisted conforming spaces like school", and that "formal research practices" led some youth to "resist participation" (ibid, pp. 995–96). Hoechner (2014, p. 12), who conducted participatory filmmaking with a group of especially stigmatized Nigerian youth, describes how "their weak position within society made the almajirai [these particular youth] participating in the film project vulnerable to suspicions and accusations in their communities".

This paper positions itself within this critical strand of literature. It aims to contribute to the debate on participatory approaches by providing a comparative analysis of two similar participatory filmmaking projects that were conducted by the same researcher in comparable contexts and on comparable topics over consecutive years. The analysis discusses why the participatory approach resonated well with youth in one case while alienating youth in the other. This represents a novel contribution to the literature, as it offers a clear illustration of the varying dynamics that the same methodology can generate with different youth groups, thereby helping to nuance homogeneous accounts of participatory approaches and deepen our understanding of the circumstances and populations for which these approaches may or may not be appropriate.

3. Participatory Filmmaking with Socially Marginalized Youth

The first case under analysis is a participatory filmmaking project that I conducted as part of my doctoral research (2014–2019) in a mid-sized town located on the outskirts of Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city. I was initially drawn to Colombia by an interest in understanding how young people viewed and perceived the country's celebrated peace process, and I chose this particular town because it was often regarded as a successful example of peacebuilding. Following the push for participatory methods in childhood and youth studies (Boyden and Ennew 1997; Groundwater-Smith 2015; Mirra et al. 2015), I thought it would be a good idea to work with a group of adolescents and youth aged 15–20 on the production of a participatory film that would showcase their perspectives on violence and peace. I expected this to be a "youth-friendly" method that would attract the town's young people due to its creative component. I therefore set out to conduct a series of workshops hosted within the local school and community center, involving participatory group exercises aimed at collaboratively developing a script, which we would then turn into a film.

After the first few weeks of research, however, I began to realize that the idyllic image of the town did not align with the local inhabitants' perceptions of their own situation. While people acknowledged that the town was much less violent than in the past, they frequently expressed concerns about the troubling state of the town's youth. "Don't you see?" they would ask me. "The vices from the city are penetrating the town. There are more drug-addicted kids every day". Locals were particularly concerned about the increasing involvement of young people in drugs, crime, and violence—an issue they believed was escalating daily. I quickly understood that if I was to engage in meaningful conversations with them, I could not avoid these topics. Consequently, I gradually shifted my research focus toward understanding young people's involvement in drug-related crime and violence (see Butti 2022a, 2022b).

That is when I began to have doubts about the efficacy of participatory methodologies for investigating the specific youth population that this new topic related to. Everyone kept talking about the town's "problematic" youths, but where were they? I did not see a single one of them in my filmmaking workshops. As the research progressed, it gradually became clear to me that, as Berents and McEvoy-Levy (2015, p. 122) put it, "schools, community groups, and youth centers, far from being neutral spaces, are ideologically loaded". Indeed, these kinds of spaces do not feel welcoming to all youth, and they

certainly do not appeal to young people who have been expelled from school or are in conflict with the law. It is important to acknowledge that young people participating in institutional spaces are likely to have significantly different experiences and views from those who are or feel excluded from these environments.

I gradually understood that, if I wanted to capture the perspectives of those "other youths", I needed to step outside these institutional spaces and formal methods and start engaging in the marginal spaces and activities that marginalized youths themselves engaged in. This required a substantial adjustment in my research methodology. I transitioned from participatory filmmaking to more "traditional" ethnographic research, seeking to identify the places where these marginalized, drug-involved young people gathered. I spent extended periods of time in these spaces, engaging in informal, unstructured individual or small group conversations with them—all of which proved to be far more effective to work with these youth than formal group work.

Through this informal ethnographic engagement, I was able to build deep relationships of trust with young people involved in the drug economy, who were, for the most part, adolescent boys aged 14–19, of lower socio-economic background, coming from single-parent families, and out of school, and typically with a criminal record. Through sustained, informal engagement with them I gained a better understanding of what alienated them from the participatory filmmaking workshops I was holding in town. For instance, one day, 16-year-old Juan[2] and I were passing by some activists making a video in the town's central square, and I asked Juan why he did not participate in those kinds of initiatives. "I did it once, and I already know how it is", he replied, rather upset. "They're going to ask us what we think about peace, and we have to say that peace is good, that we want peace because I don't know what …". It was clear that the formalized setting of participatory methodologies made Juan feel he had to abide by a pre-established script that did not reflect his genuine opinions.

Juan's words underscore the skepticism with which many of the town's youth, especially the most marginalized, looked at the various external actors (state institutions, NGOs, and even researchers) that conducted participatory activities with young people in town. Over-intervention in transitional contexts is a complex issue that I discuss elsewhere (see Butti and McGonigle 2019). For the purposes of this article, suffice it to say that the way young people are involved—and often tokenized—in processes branded as "participatory" by institutions and NGOs often ends up deepening their skepticism and disengagement from structured approaches altogether.

Despite these challenges, I continued to carry out the participatory filmmaking project until the end, with a different group of youth who did decide to join my workshops. Most of the participants in this group were in-school, socially engaged youth with relatively functional families who considered themselves "good kids", distant from the world of drugs and crime that entangled their "bad" peers. This group included 15–20 youth with whom I conducted weekly meetings over nine months. This process culminated in the production and screening of a 40-minute-long documentary, *Somos* [We Are], in which young people articulated their views on violence and peace.

Even with this group, however, the process was not entirely smooth. Often, the youth lost motivation, requiring me to constantly encourage their participation through reminders and provide incentives—like snacks—for them to attend meetings. It was also challenging to define a clear storyline and main message for the documentary. These youth, who did not have experience in social engagement and activism, often struggled to express independent opinions that went beyond mere repetitions of their parents' or my own views. As a result, the perspectives that appeared in the documentary failed to convey a jointly developed message, and often perpetuated local clichés, like judgmental opinions about their "bad" peers involved in drugs and crime.

One of the drug-involved youth I became close to through my ethnographic research, 19-year-old Sebastián, attended the documentary screening (Figure 1). During the Q&A, he attempted to share his perspective, emphasizing that many young people enter drug worlds because they see no other alternatives and that they are not inherently "bad". He was, however, questioned by the audience, and left the room upset. In a later conversation, Sebastián explained me his frustration: "They [the youth who made the documentary] do not listen; they do not want to understand. They only talk about peace, but they will never understand *me*. Why should I try to explain them how I see the world? Just to let them tell me once again that I◉m wrong? No, I◉d better keep silent and continue my own way. This peace is not for me".

Figure 1. Screening of *Somos* at the *Museo Casa de la Memoria* in Medellín.

All in all, while the participatory filmmaking methodology proved effective in engaging some of the young people in town—particularly those self-identified "good kids"—, even if not always smoothly, it was entirely unsuitable for reaching the more marginalized, stigmatized, and socially excluded youth labeled as "bad kids" or "problem kids". As exemplified by the reactions of Juan and Sebastián, the formalized, group-based, and performative nature of this methodology made them feel compelled to adhere to mainstream narratives, leaving no room for their unique perspectives, which diverged significantly from those of other youth.

In sum, these narratives illustrate that participatory techniques, while well-intended, can become barriers to participation for individuals who do not conform to mainstream or socially accepted narratives. They can leave young people like Sebastián and Juan feeling profoundly excluded, thus incurring the risk of causing harm. Moreover, such approaches are particularly ill-suited to address the illegal, taboo, or sensitive subjects that the life experiences of marginalized youth typically bring up. Consequently, these methodologies should be employed with caution, and any generalizations—such as the assumption that youth who take part in participatory processes can speak on behalf of ◉all youth◉—should be avoided.

4. Participatory Filmmaking with Young Activists

The second case is a three-month-long participatory filmmaking project that I carried out during a postdoctoral fellowship in 2019. Even if it was significantly shorter, this project had more distinctly action-oriented aims than my previous doctoral research, as it sought to document, analyze, and amplify the local urban peacebuilding experiences of young activists in Medellín's urban margins.

Once again, I set out to use participatory filmmaking as a research tool. The participants in this project were also predominantly male and socio-economically marginalized youth coming from peripheral urban neighborhoods. However, this time, they were slightly older (ages 20–25), they came from a large city rather than a mid-size town, and, most importantly, they had a significant history of youth-led activism. Many of them had led or were deeply engaged in social movements and activist or artistic projects, which awarded them notable leadership skills. Some of them were engaged in environmental causes; others wanted to prevent youth recruitment through the use of arts or sports; others advocated for gender equality. In short, they had a clear agenda to push forward—a message to convey.

This meant that the participatory process felt much smoother. I did not have to constantly provide incentives for young people to participate in the process. They showed up spontaneously and were very committed to the project without needing any encouragement, because they viewed filmmaking as one additional tool to advance the broader agendas, to which they were already dedicating a great portion of their time and energy. We met organically, rather than on a set week day, and organized our respective availability through a group chat, with them often taking initiative to organize the meeting and choosing the location.

The participants also significantly shaped the course of the project and had clear opinions on how the final products should look like. For instance, they maintained that the final product should not be a long-feature documentary but rather a series of five short videos, as these would have higher visibility on social media and other dissemination platforms they already used. For each mini-film, they selected an activist initiative that they personally knew and felt did not receive enough attention from mainstream media. These included, for example, projects such as a local street circus, an environmental consciousness initiative, and a local rap project, which they documented through interviews and filming.

The final product was a mini docu-series titled *Realidades Juveniles* [Youth Realities]. This series was screened by the different youth collectives in their local communities (Figure 2), and was used by the activists as a tool to advocate for better recognition of youth as peacebuilding agents.

Of course, this process, too, had its complications. Filming in violence- and crime-affected contexts is a sensitive activity that requires careful handling. Specifically, one of the short films, titled *La Parceria* [The Street Group], aimed to document a street-based circus project where young people practiced circus arts using aerial silks hung under a large bridge. Although the project presented itself as an arts initiative, its underlying aim was to keep children and young people engaged in an artistic activity, and in this way keep them away from the influence of drug gangs controlling the area. The project, therefore, had a strong, if implicit, socio-political component.

Significantly, the youth insisted that the filming should be conducted precisely at the location where the circus training took place, which also happened to be a major drug-dealing spot in the neighborhood. This necessitated negotiations with the local drug gangs, who ultimately granted us permission to film on-site under the condition that we would not capture any of their members engaged in drug dealing. While I was initially hesitant about filming in such a sensitive area, the young activists took the lead in negotiating with

the gang and selecting the filming location, and I ultimately decided to trust their judgment and decisions.

Figure 2. One of the young activists at the forefront of the filming of *Realidades Juveniles*.

The filming went smoothly, and the short film was screened a few weeks later under that same bridge (Figure 3), with no immediate reaction from the gang. The young activists were thrilled with the result, which reassured me that everything was in order.

Figure 3. Picture of *La Parceria* projection under the street circus bridge.

Over one year later, however, while I was back in Europe, one of the protagonists of this particular film texted me about a problem he had encountered with the local gang.

He explained that the gang had used the film to accuse him of interfering with their business. He informed me that he had decided to leave not only the neighborhood but the entire city for a while, and he advised me to be cautious about returning to the neighbourhood.

When I received this news, I felt utterly at a loss. I was worried for what would happen to him, I feared that the research had caused harm, and I doubted my competence as an anthropologist. I started to ponder what may have gone wrong. During the video editing process, we had been careful to avoid including any phrases that might be interpreted as direct denunciations or judgments of the gang's activities, yet it appeared that this caution had not sufficed. This incident helped me realize that no matter how meticulous one is with the content of a film, the mere existence of video material—or any other tangible research product—can be manipulated by malicious actors, especially in violence-affected contexts, placing participants at risk.

I was obviously devastated by the news and began to deeply question my ability as a researcher to protect my participants from harm and foresee risks. However, this youth's reaction struck me. He did not blame me or accuse me of putting him in danger. Instead, he expressed fullm ownership and even pride over the video. Rather than hiding away in fear, as soon as he found himself in a safer geographical location, he wrote a long social media post denouncing those threats. Below are some excerpts of this post:

> *Today, after a year and a half of having made five micro-documentaries with [anonymized NGO] and academic researcher Elena Butti, I am issuing this statement to let you know that because of this video, a 'silenced intimidation' has been directed towards me. Some of my friends from the [anonymized] neighborhood, where I have lived my whole life, have been warned not to associate with me, as I could be targeted at any moment for what I said in this video. […] Now that I want to return to Medellín, I am filled with fear and uncertainty about walking through my neighborhood, knowing that these actors would not be happy with my return. I feel alone in this situation, which is why I am making it public. […] I want to return and take action without fear for the transformation and change we always seek. I have the strength and determination to continue my path and my fight—a fight that is not just mine, but of many in the northeastern area of Medellín, especially in this beautiful space under the bridge.*

He concluded the message by re-posting the video. While I remained worried, this reaction, his choice to re-post the video, and the conversations we had afterward deeply reassured me. I was, of course, profoundly concerned about his safety and did everything I could to ensure he could return to the city safely—something he eventually managed to do. This situation has certainly taught me that film projects always carry the inherent risk of being misused or instrumentalized for the wrong purposes by ill-intended actors, leading me to be more careful in the future. At the same time, however, the reaffirmed sense of ownership over the film that emerged from this post showed that this youth stood behind the participatory project and perceived it as his own. This convinced me that the participatory approach had worked well this time, as the young activists saw it not as an exercise they had to participate in, but rather as a tool to advance their own battles.

All in all, this case shows that participatory filmmaking, while not devoid of complications, can be an extremely powerful tool when working with young people who see it as an additional tool to advance their already existing agendas, their already ongoing fights. In these instances, the participatory methodology is not superimposed by external researchers, but rather deeply appropriated by the youth—something that emerges in the most impactful ways in critical situations involving problems or dangers.

5. Ethical Considerations

The above-mentioned research involved complex ethical dilemmas, which I address in detail elsewhere (Butti 2024). For the purposes of this article, it is key to highlight that both cases raise critical questions about the researcher's ability to fully control participatory research processes and uphold the fundamental principle of "do no harm". As I have argued elsewhere (Butti 2016, 2024), such incidents occur far more frequently during fieldwork than is acknowledged in scholarly publications.

Participatory approaches inherently require researchers to relinquish some control over the research process, thereby increasing the likelihood that events may deviate from expectations. When conducting research in contexts affected by violence, on sensitive topics, or with marginalized populations, however, these risks can have significant consequences and should not be underestimated.

There is no universal formula for avoiding such risks. Still, the field could advance toward more meaningful ethical practices if researchers were willing to write more openly, honestly, and reflexively about what went wrong during the research process. As Wolseth (2019, p. 256) suggests, a more "confessional inflicted ethnography"—one that transparently explores dilemmas, mistakes, and lessons learned—is not only useful, but also an ethical imperative in itself.

As early-career scholars, we often feel pressured to "clean up" our doubts and conceal our mistakes to convince doctoral examiners or journal reviewers that our research is unproblematic. While it was certainly challenging to write openly and transparently about the methodological and safety challenges I encountered with these participatory approaches, the account provided in this paper aims to contribute to and advocate for a more honest and confessional writing practice, as well as to assist future researchers in reflecting on and preparing for the complexities of fieldwork beforehand.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the comparison of these two cases provides a clear picture of how the same participatory technique, implemented by the same researcher in very similar locations, can be highly effective with one group of youth and not with another. The first case illustrates how participatory techniques may inadvertently reinforce mainstream views and silence the voices of marginalized populations. In contrast, the second case demonstrates that the same technique can be exceptionally productive in supporting the social struggles of young people who already have an agenda, even in the face of significant safety challenges.

All in all, the main point I make in this paper is that youth are not all the same, and no single research technique can adequately capture the diverse views of the entire youth population. Instead, researchers should carefully consider the specific youth demographic they aim to understand and adopt research methods that are (sub-)culturally appropriate and attuned to effectively engage with them. Every demographic will carry its own topics of relevance, and the topics and issues raised by marginalized youth will often be less suited to exploration through a structured participatory process.

Rather than celebrating participatory techniques as a panacea for childhood and youth studies, I argue for the need to refocus on the construct of meaningful relationships with young interlocutors—relationships that may take different forms depending on the preferences and ways of relating of the particular youth in question. As noted by Strocka (2008, p. 272), "participatory research is not automatically "more ethical" than traditional scientific inquiry". Refocusing on meaningful relationships, and subsuming our methodological choices to the preservation and enhancement of these connections, is far more effective than imposing a specific participatory methodology onto sub-groups of youth

who may not resonate with its formalized, institutionalized, or group-based settings that such methodologies require.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data for this project is not publicly available as participants granted its use exclusively to the author following the informed consent process.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Notes

1. Given the breadth of literature on participatory research, this is not intended to be a comprehensive review but rather to showcase the diversity of groups with which this approach has been applied and has been explicitly written about in a dedicated article.
2. All names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

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