Chapter 8

Lights, Camera, (Youth Participatory) Action! Lessons from Filming a Documentary with Trans and Gender Non-conforming Youth in the USA

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With other people of color that were in the documentary, I wanted them to talk and I wanted them to speak their truth because I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. I don't want anyone else to sugarcoat it. I don't want them to whitewash it. – Autumn (a pseudonym), age 17, Black genderqueer person

8.1 Introduction

Fifty years ago, Americans scarcely had the language to describe the uprising that queer people—specifically trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people of color—led at the Stonewall Inn in New York. When accounts of the riots were entered into the official record, journalists made clear their disdain and disgust for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) patrons involved: they were called slurs, were misgendered, and were described in terms that minimized their concerns and experiences (Eastmond 2017). On the rare occasions that their voices were included, they were mediated through straight authors' judgmental gaze—for example, in the cruelly titled “*Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad.*” Even when the *New York Daily News* quotes participants directly, the straight, cis-gender newsperson editorializes in an attempt to make them seem frivolous, misgenders them in an attempt at humor, and feigns confusion in an attempt to make queer people seem un-knowable and inherently perplexing (Lisker 1969).

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In the 50 years that have followed, our culture has developed a vocabulary that enables more meaningful discourse around the experiences of those marginalized for their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Mainstream media coverage of the riots, protests, and celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rising, for example, demonstrates more nuance in their reporting. *The New York Daily News*' many stories in June 2019 offer less homophobic and antagonistic criticism of participants, and instead report the events in a more neutral, less judgmental tone, being careful to use appropriate terminology. Even more telling, though, is the companion piece written by Anthony Coron, who reflects on the experience of being at the Stonewall Inn on the first night of the riots (Coron 2019). By including his unmediated, first-person account of the events, the newspaper—potentially inadvertently—offers a corrective for its coverage 50 years ago: it implicitly acknowledges that marginalized people should express their own stories without being filtered through the gaze of judgmental outsiders.

Much in the same way, the current research project aimed to contribute to the discourse on TGNC youth of color by presenting their stories with as little mediation and involvement of outsiders as possible. The youth participatory action research (YPAR) project involved 12 youth and three adult advisors, with the youth responsible for the design and implementation of the research project. The young people worked together to film a documentary about the experiences of TGNC youth in a mid-sized southeastern city with the goal of authentically representing the challenges, triumphs, struggles, and resilience in their community. Moreover, the selection of art as the primary modality for the research enabled the young people to authentically and completely communicate their experiences in a compelling, effective way. This chapter begins with a brief background on the experience of TGNC youth in the USA with special attention to the health inequities and disparities they face, and then discusses the research process, culminating in critical reflections on the possibilities, challenges, and logistical needs of such a project.

8.2 The Experiences of TGNC Youth

Much of the research on trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth folds the population under the umbrella of sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth, providing insight into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender non-conforming (LGBTQ+) young people. LGBTQ+ youth are at an elevated risk for victimization (Berlan et al. 2014; Dempsey 1994; Schneider et al. 2012). This victimization can negatively impact the healthy development of LGBTQ+ youth, as it has been associated with depression (Poteat and Espelage 2007; Russell et al. 2011; Toomey et al. 2010), substance use (Bontempo and D'Augelli 2002; Espelage et al. 2008; Goldbach et al. 2014), and suicidality (Bontempo and D'Augelli 2002; Friedman et al. 2006; Russell et al. 2011).

Although much of the research on queer young people simply groups LGBTQ+ youth together, TGNC students may be at even greater risk for negative outcomes.

TGNC youth report higher levels of depression (Bazargan and Galvan 2012; Budge et al. 2013), attempted suicide (Goldblum et al. 2012; Grossman and D'Augelli 2007; Haas et al. 2014; Toomey et al. 2018), and problematic drug use (Klein and Golub 2016; Reisner et al. 2015) than their peers. They also report a lack of resources, support, and safety in their environments as a result of being TGNC (Grossman and D'Augelli 2007). The majority of TGNC youth report feeling unsafe at school (McGuire et al. 2010). Further, potentially due to the higher rates of victimization and lower feelings of support, being a TGNC student is associated with lower academic achievement, increased fear-based truancy, and lower academic goals (Greytak et al. 2009). When compared with their victimized gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) peers, TGNC students experience higher levels of victimization, harassment, school disengagement, and absence of resources for support (Greytak et al. 2009).

It is important to note that although this research may present a bleak picture of TGNC youth's experiences, recent research demonstrates TGNC youth's resilience, especially when supported by parents, school systems, and communities that acknowledge their needs and treat them with respect. When asked about what supports are important for their healthy development, TGNC students note that access to education systems that acknowledge and affirm their identities are important sources of resilience (Hatchel et al. 2018; Singh et al. 2014). Further research demonstrates the importance of a supportive school environment: TGNC students at schools with appropriate resources and supports (e.g., Gay-Straight or Gender Sexuality Alliances, anti-harassment policies, or information about LGBTQ+ people in the school library) indicate that their school is safer and are less likely to skip school (Greytak et al. 2009). School belonging is also associated with lower rates of suicidality and depression for trans adolescents (Hatchel et al. 2018), and it may protect TGNC young people from drug use (Hatchel and Marx 2018) and poor mental health outcomes (Hatchel et al. 2018). Family support is also associated with resilience, as TGNC youth who report supportive families also report decreased distress, improved mental health, and self-acceptance (Budge et al. 2013; Pflum et al. 2015; Sánchez and Vilain 2009). For TGNC adults, a supportive family is associated with fewer suicide attempts (Haas et al. 2014; Mustanski and Liu 2013) and depressive symptoms and a greater quality of life (Austin 2016; Mustanski and Liu 2013).

It is clear, then, that the experiences of TGNC youth are more complicated than traditional research methods may be able to capture; there is a tension between the health disparities that impact their well-being and healthy development and the strength and resilience they derive from environments that acknowledge and affirm their identities. Beyond resilience and health disparities, another tension that exists in representing the experiences of TGNC lies in the unique experiences of TGNC youth of color. In addition to a sense of belonging, family supports, and school-based resources, TGNC young people of color express the need for affinity spaces based on race, as well as access to representation of other LGBTQ-identified people of color (Singh 2012). While access to social media might be a vehicle for expanding community and increasing access to knowledge around the experiences of

TGNC people of color, the absence of empirical research at the intersection of race and gender speaks to the added pressures on this population of young people.

Indeed, community-based participatory research and youth participatory action research (Camarota and Fine 2010; Kemmis et al. 2013; Kidd and Kral 2005) offer researchers the opportunity to include the voices of marginalized groups directly and with limited external mediation, capturing the many nuances of their experiences. In line with the values espoused in health promotion (see Chap. 1, this volume), by including young people as experts and giving them the opportunity to determine what research products best represent their own experiences, we offer them the space to control the conversation and thereby harness the power to shape their own narratives.

The complexity of TGNC youth's experiences may be best captured through arts-based research, as it inherently allows for—and potentially encourages—the intricacies and contradictions of their experiences in environments that at turns may result in increased mental and physical health concerns but may also be supportive and health-promotive. Prior work with documentary film as a medium for research notes that the creation of a documentary film engenders a necessarily rich text that can capture and document data that may be otherwise difficult to access, especially with marginalized groups (Parr 2007). Moreover, the practice of collaborative documentary filmmaking may allow for participants to accurately represent themselves in ways that sidestep the hierarchical nature of traditional research, opening new avenues for embedded and embodied knowledges (Kendon 2003) and potential resulting in increased synergy (see Chap. 21, this volume, for theoretical background on synergy). For these reasons, this research project aimed to leverage the power of participatory documentary film to amplify the voices and share the unique and specific experiences of TGNC youth in ways that more traditional research methodologies may have silenced, flattened, or rendered untenable.

8.3 The Untitled Trans Youth Film Project

In December of 2017, the 14- to 18-year-old members of “Just Us,” a program for LGBTQ+ youth at a local non-profit community center in a mid-sized southeastern city, sat down to watch *The Trans List*, an HBO-produced documentary film that profiled 11 trans and gender non-conforming US celebrities, activists, athletes, and figures of note. Page Regan—then the program coordinator of Just Us, now a doctoral researcher and co-author of this chapter—selected the film to connect with the young people's experiences and to offer visions of potential futures for TGNC youth, who were so often shown only limited options. Robert Marx, who was at the time an adult advisor for the youth group and is now a researcher and co-author of this chapter, was eager to see the young people's responses to the video. As they watched, the youth were clearly interested; side conversations stopped, and they snapped their fingers to indicate support and agreement as figures on the screen shared experiences that resonated with their own. At the conclusion of the film, Page facilitated a talk-back session that invited the young people to consider the strengths

of the movie. Although the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, many young people offered that the stories depicted on screen did not conform to their own experiences: those interviewed seemed wealthier, older, and more binary in terms of their gender identity (i.e., they tended to identify as either a trans man or a trans woman, rather than as non-binary or genderqueer).

During that conversation, one young person suggested that they could make their own film—sort of a *Youth Trans List*—that more accurately captured their narratives. Several other students expressed interest, and the idea gained buzz and critical traction. Following the meeting, Robert and Page met to determine ways forward. Robert had previous experience with a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project that focused on marginalized youth's experiences of discrimination and saw an opportunity to bring that framework to the documentary film project. Because both Page and Robert wanted the young people to be able to create a product that they would be proud of and that would accurately capture their experiences, they saw YPAR as a way of ensuring that the young people adopted a systematic approach that yielded meaningful findings. We then approached the young people with the more formal procedures of a YPAR project, and they were very open to it. Because their vision of the documentary film already included key aspects of research such as participant recruitment, interview design, and thematic analysis, the young people adopted the YPAR framework naturally and saw the benefit of approaching the project with systematicity and an eye toward research.

In line with the tenets of YPAR, the young people determined the research design, the participants, and the procedure, and they conducted the research and analysis themselves. Robert and Page served as adult advisors for the project, securing meeting space and other resources, ensuring that the young people respected each other and allowed all voices to be heard, and assumed liability, as the young people were under 18. Importantly, Robert and Page also provided research training for the young people, instructing them on best practices for recruiting participants, designing interview protocols, conducting interviews, and engaging in thematic analysis.

In the sections that follow, we outline the process from idea to execution, noting the successes and difficulties we encountered along the way following the Bergen Model of Collaborative Functioning (see Chap. 21, this volume). Throughout the research process, both the adult advisors and the youth participants remained singularly focused on sharing the stories of TGNC youth. We aimed to capture the complexity and variety of TGNC experiences in the hopes that audiences would have a better understanding of the realities of TGNC youth's lives.

8.3.1 Inputs: Mission, Participants, Partners, and Funding

From its inception, the documentary film project had a clear and direct mission: the young people wanted to share their worlds, their experiences, and their hearts with a broader audience. In creating the film, the young people hoped to document the aspects of their lives that were most difficult, as well as their triumphs and goals for the future. In describing why a documentary film was the medium of choice for the

project, one participant said, “The documentary literally allows you to see...because [in other situations] you see people, but you don’t see them. You don’t necessarily consider them, or you don’t consider what they like to do... You don’t consider what their favorite color is. You don’t consider how difficult it is for them to walk down the street, whether or not they’ve been walking on the street and feel secure, and whether they’re going to be sexually assaulted. You don’t consider any of that... You don’t consider them, and you don’t see them; and so, I think that the ... I do like the idea of the documentary being, like, you see them, and then, you *see* them.”

In our first meeting as a research team, we opened the group to any young person who was interested in creating a documentary film, and we recruited from among the youth who came to the community center for LGBTQ+ programming, as well as from other youth in the area who might be interested. Twelve young people, aged 14–19, attended our first meeting, representing a variety of gender identities and expressions. Most young people identified as TGNC, but two young people identified as cisgender allies. In that first meeting, the young people determined that the film would focus specifically on the most marginalized among TGNC youth: TGNC youth of color. Research team members cited the high rates of violence and murder that TGNC youth of color experience, as well as the fact that mainstream accounts of TGNC youth often omit or exclude youth of color, neglecting to consider the ways that racism impacts the experience of transphobia. For many of the research team members, this was also a personal project—more than half of the young people identified as youth of color, and their desire to illuminate their experiences came from a sense of not being heard in other forums.

To support the research endeavors, we relied on several key partnerships that proved invaluable. Because Page was a full-time employee of the community center, we could use the space as needed for meetings and, eventually, for filming. We could also recruit participants for the film and advertise through the community center, which made finding interview participants easier. Robert, who was then a doctoral student in the area, leveraged connections with his university and with the local library to help the project come to fruition. Robert received a small grant from the Community Engaged Research Core that provided both funding for the research project and guidance in managing the many moving pieces that go along with YPAR projects; this money funded everything from pizza at research team meetings to external hard drives to server access for uploading video segments. Robert also reached out to the local library, which fortuitously ran a studio and maker space for teenagers. The library provided editing equipment and space, which allowed young people to collaboratively edit the project, and it also had trained professionals who could offer guidance. An additional partnership proved important: the parent of one of the research team members was a professional filmmaker and had considerable camera and lighting equipment, as well as expertise with filming.

8.3.2 *Throughputs: Implementation, Execution, and Analysis*

As clear as the mission was and as natural as the partnerships came to be, other aspects of the research process were more nebulous. The young people had varying experience and interest in some aspects of making a documentary film, and so we split into two groups: one group focused on the specifics and aesthetics of the filming, and the other focused on the content of the documentary. This meant that one group focused on determining which cameras would be used, what the set-up would be, where and when we would film, and what the overall aesthetic vision was. The other group determined who would conduct the interviews, who would be interviewed, what questions would be asked, and what the overall emotional tenor of the film would be. This division enabled those with more interest in or knowledge about filmmaking to deepen their commitment to the technical aspects of the film, while allowing those who were more concerned with the recruitment of participants and the storytelling to focus on that aspect of the research. The research team met once a week for 5 months; we would begin as a full group and then split into the two teams, with one adult advisor going with each group, and then return to a large group meeting to share progress. Approximately a month into the project, a third adult advisor who also worked full time at the community center and who has considerable experience with digital media and filmmaking, joined the group and served as a technical advisor to ensure that the project was feasible and appropriate.

Over the course of these meetings, the research team determined the particulars of all aspects of the film, making most decisions by consensus and working to hear all voices. Each subgroup elected a leader who was responsible for the deliverables and for ensuring that all necessary work was completed. The young people put together dioramas of the filming day, wrote out interview questions, contacted young people to be interviewed, determined the schedule for filming, and even arranged for a local photographer—the parent of one of the research team members—to take photographs of the interview participants. Over the course of the meetings, the young people maintained unwavering focus on including the stories of TGNC youth of color and allowing them to be as complicated and complete as possible. Nonetheless, the young people engaged in vigorous debate concerning the specifics of achieving their vision; in particular, the youth had a bit of difficulty deciding on the scope of the interview questions, the participants to include, and who would conduct the interviews. This was the result, mainly, of thoughtful and judicious consideration of how to best meet their goals—they determined that young people of color might respond best to an interviewer of color, and they also struggled to balance their desire to focus only on youth of color with their concern that not enough young people would want to be interviewed. Similarly, their debate over interview questions centered on their desire to avoid leading participants into sharing overly sanitized, happy versions of their lives, but also wanting to avoid setting their participants up to only speak about damage and sadness. In the end, the

research team reached a compromise by designing open-ended questions that allowed participants to respond in a variety of ways, but also by asking a set of specific questions, some of which included:

- How does your gender identity affect your daily life?
- What aspects of your identity are you comfortable with?
- Are there aspects of your identity that you hope to change?
- When do you feel the safest or most acknowledged?
- What would you like to tell other LGBTQ+ people?
- What has it been like to deal with living in a society that is often hostile to your existence?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- What are you excited about?

They also created a schedule and rotated through interviewers so that everyone who wanted to participate as an interviewer could.

Over the course of the planning meetings, the young people engaged in all stages of the arts-based research project design. They finalized interview protocols through piloting and practicing questions with group members, determining which questions were too broad, which were too closed off, and which worked effectively. They also drafted a list of potential participants from their own network of TGNC youth of color, created recruitment material, and recruited participants. Additionally, the technical team created specifications for all aspects of the day of filming, including mocking up filming plans; determining the lighting plan; and designating who would set up, run cameras A and B, and get extra footage of the participants to intercut with their interviews.

The planning meetings culminated in a day-long filming session during which all interviewees were photographed, interviewed on camera, and filmed in informal interactions with the camera to capture their personalities. The research team set up all camera equipment and lighting the day before, then spent 12 hours filming eight interviews with TGNC youth. The interviews varied in length, but all were between 25 and 75 minutes. Following the filming of the interviews, three members of the research team worked at the local library to edit the film down. They began by removing verbal tics and fillers, and then brought transcripts of the interviews to the whole research team.

The research team spent a month reading each transcript, watching raw footage, and determining what aspects of each interview to highlight. They also engaged in thematic coding, surfacing key ideas across interviews to divide the film into units. The editing team then cut together the footage thematically, creating a 15-minute rough cut of the final documentary. The research team was trained in thematic analysis and engaged in a modified constant-comparative method that involved the reading and re-reading of transcripts, the identification of codes and themes, and the re-examination of transcripts to ensure that the identified themes still fit as the analysis continued. Because the YPAR team determined that their main product would be the documentary film (and not, for example, an academic article or a blog post), all research and analysis were conducted with the documentary film in mind.

That is, the transcripts were analyzed with an eye toward the documentary, and the themes that were surfaced were those that would be present in the film. The transcripts were coded and analyzed systematically, but only in terms of which aspects of the interviews provided salient material for the documentary. As the major themes coalesced, the research team then read through each transcript to find the clearest and most captivating examples. One salient theme, for example, was the racial divide within the LGBTQ+ community—the research team deeply resonated with the respondents’ experiences of racism and isolation within nominally inclusive spaces or histories. The research team then selected moments from interviews that highlighted the lack of representation of queer people of color in LGBTQ+ history-telling and spoke to the isolation experienced in spaces for LGBTQ+ youth that were predominantly white. Another example of the research process centered on familial tensions. For example, after the team surfaced a theme concerning the complicated dynamic between trans youth and their parents—who could be both supportive and closed-minded—they re-read all transcripts for the voices and moments that best captured this idea. In this way, although the research team engaged in a systematic analysis of the data they had collected, their sole focus was the creation of the documentary film and the sharing of their findings in that way.

8.3.3 *Output: The In-Progress Film*

Although the research team worked cohesively to design, implement, film, and initially edit the documentary film, progress flagged in the months following filming. As other priorities came to the forefront—our research team was all students, after all—and as the required work became more technically demanding, weeks went by without progress. As of this publication, the film is still in progress. The research team has functionally disbanded; although they remain committed to having a completed documentary, we lack the traction and time to bring the project to completion. The third adult advisor, who has more technical experience, has recently taken on the task of beginning to edit together the rough cut into a final documentary film, but progress remains slow.

Although the film is not yet in its final form, both authors have shared clips of the film in trainings, classes, and educational settings. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and viewers have reflected on how much they have deepened their understanding of TGNC youth of color’s experiences. Specifically, audiences have noted the terminology they have learned and the additional insight into both the strength that TGNC youth of color have as well as the many challenges they face in their daily lives. One tangible impact of the film is that viewers at a center for sexual assault survivors have changed their intake forms and their trainings around gender and sexuality. These preliminary results, of course, must be taken lightly, as the film has not yet been finalized.

In addition to assisting with advising the research team, Robert also conducted interviews with many of the research team members in the hopes of better under-

standing the impact of working on the documentary film. The young people offered clear examples of the ways in which their participation had deepened their commitment to social justice and their belief in the power of documentary film. Additionally, though, the young people reflected on some of the challenges in the research project. In the discussion section, we include some of these reflections alongside our own thoughts. For the most part, the research team members' thoughts resonated with our own interpretations of the events of the project.

8.4 Discussion

Engaging in this arts-based YPAR project has contributed to the dialogue and discourse surrounding TGNC youth of color. Despite the very limited release of the documentary film in its current form, it nonetheless contains important data about the lives of a group of people who are too rarely discussed. Moreover, the film contains the voices of the young people themselves and is deeply and rigorously informed by TGNC youth of color in every stage of the research project. In the following section, we discuss the possibilities that such a project offers, as well as the challenges that we faced in its execution. We finish with lessons we have learned through the process.

8.4.1 *Possibilities and Promise*

In many ways, this project represents a fulfilment of the promise of YPAR and documentary film. It represents a valuable source of data that would otherwise not be available—a rich text that captures TGNC youth's experiences unmediated, direct from the source. In many respects, this was possible only because the project was participatory in nature and organized and completed by the youth themselves; their own connection to the material and to the art form enabled the project's success. Moreover, the young people who pioneered this project were familiar with each other because of their shared attendance at after-school, queer-centered programming, meaning that they were also connected to one another. The project also afforded students an opportunity to connect more deeply around a shared purpose. Many of the research team participants reported that a defining characteristic of the group was their shared commitment to a goal, and they credited this shared commitment to the success of the project.

Importantly, the project represented great diversity among participants. The research team represented different ethnic and racial groups, different schools, and different embodied identities related to trans and queer life; this rich diversity pro-

pelled the project forward in immeasurable ways. The young people were able to provide a more complete, accurate, and thorough depiction of TGNC youth's lives because they lived those lives and knew which questions would elicit the richest discussion. They knew which misconceptions and half-truths needed to be corrected and which words would be most useful to dispel the myths that surrounded them. Further, they knew which aspects of TGNC life would most impact their audience, and they skillfully chose to share certain portions of their world to improve outcomes. Moreover, the young people represented diversity in skill and interest around making a documentary film: some students were adept with camera and lighting, others had experience interviewing, and others were merely willing to learn. The diversity of talent also meant that the young people were able to learn from each other and teach one another, and by the end of the project, all participants had additional research skills. Because the team was trained in basic research methods to complete the project, they all gained skills around recruiting participants, crafting interview protocols and conducting interviews, and performing thematic analysis of qualitative data.

One of the chief sources of success of the project was thoughtfully chosen partnerships. Although the adult advisors had considerable experience working with youth and running YPAR projects, they had very limited experience with documentary filmmaking. Partnering with the local library, which was able to provide both equipment and expertise, and the parent of a research team member, who was a filmmaker, supplemented the gaps in our experience and made the project possible. Similarly, the partnership with the Community Engaged Research Core provided financial support for the project and made all aspects of it easier. Our ultimate partnership with the third adult advisor also helped the project along, and it is our hope that with her guidance, we will have a completed film soon. Finally, the project represents a partnership between the university—of which Robert was a representative—and the community, in which Page worked. This partnership enabled the leveraging of important resources and expertise, as Page could draw on past program participants and their connection to youth, while Robert could address research concerns such as Institutional Review Board approval and incentives for participation.

Although the rough cut of the film has only preliminarily been released, we hope that it is fulfilling the promise that the young people have and making their community safer, stronger, and more supportive. As family support and school support are two key drivers of TGNC resilience, we hope that showing this film—albeit to only a few dozen people—has improved their interactions with TGNC youth and has created a healthier environment for sexual and gender minorities. Even if the project only served to touch the young people involved in the creation of the film, it was certainly a success: the research team shared time and again how valuable the experience was and how important it was for them to be a part of it. The young people came to see themselves as agents of change and shapers of knowledge—two key aspects of resilient, healthy youth.

8.4.2 *Challenges*

Although the project delivered on much of its promise, it was hindered by a number of challenges, both foreseen and unforeseen. A foreseen, consistent challenge was continuity. All students involved in the project attended school full time and were responsible for familial and work commitments that could not be compromised by their participation in the documentary project. Sometimes the students were able to meet every week, completing large aspects of the planning process and even devoting extra time to the work, while at other times sessions became few and far between. We found that without a clear set of expectations for the editing process, and without a stable person to help support this process, film editing was slowed almost completely to a halt. We did not expect that students' interest, availability, and productivity would drop off so suddenly after filming was completed; students were committed to the designated weekly meetings, the planning of the filming and interviewing, and the events leading up to and including the day of filming. Following that, though, the project slowed considerably, and many research team members spoke of the film as if it were complete and finished, even though it was not. Moreover, because only one or two team members could edit at a time, it was difficult to maintain continuity or interest once all participants had read the transcripts and selected key parts.

Another foreseen challenge that nonetheless hindered the progress of the documentary film was the tension in our roles as adult advisors of a YPAR project. We found it difficult to know when we should step in and intervene, and when we should allow the young people to solve the problems for themselves. For example, at times the young people worked together as a perfectly functional group, allowing each other to speak and contribute ideas equally. At other times, though, we felt compelled to intervene to ensure that all voices were heard. Similarly, we were unsure how much of a hands-on role to take in the planning and scheduling of meetings, especially after filming. Leading up to the filming day, the young people took considerable initiative and scheduled extra meetings, but after filming, they were less available. As adult advisors, we did not know how much we should push the issue or force the students to have meetings or to complete deliverables. This is an ongoing challenge, as we still work to complete the film and are unsure how much external guidance and structure we can impose on the young people.

An unforeseen challenge in this work was the labor that the narrative involved. In the filming process, several participants became deeply emotional as they were invited to unveil past trauma around their identities. Given the emotional and immersive nature of qualitative data collection and the potential burdens borne of eliciting and transmitting truth through narrative, we should have been more cognizant of the environment that was created. Many of our research team members became involved in the emotional care and support of our interview participants, and we had not prepared sufficiently for this. We were fortunate to have access to exemplary mental health services and guidance for young people through our partnership with the community organization.

Another unforeseen challenge was the gap between young people's desires to participate and the skills they needed to complete tasks. Many of the students expressed interest in joining the research team so that they could develop skills with camerawork, lighting, and editing. As adult advisors for the project, we were excited to have young people who wanted to learn, and we hoped that our partnership with the library would help bring them the needed skills. Unfortunately, we did not realize just how much training is required to become a competent video editor, and our research team members lacked the time to devote to learning these new skills. At times, it was easier for our partners to complete tasks rather than train our team members to complete them, which frustrated those who wanted to learn. For example, on the day of the shoot, the filmmaker parent of one of the research team members found that it was more expedient to set up the lights himself, and therefore did not train a team member to set them up. This frustrated the team members and made the experience less valuable for them. Nonetheless, when shooting on a deadline, it is understandable that the lights needed to be set up quickly. Resolving this challenge, therefore, is difficult.

8.4.3 Lessons Learned

Over the 2 years of this project, we have learned a number of lessons that would make the completion of an arts-based YPAR project with marginalized youth more successful. Drawing on the many strengths of our project, we have learned the importance of assembling a diverse team that has partnerships across equipment, skill level, financial support abilities, and life experiences. Moreover, involving the population of interest directly in all aspects of the process leads to a richer, more important final product. Additionally, creating a university-community partnership alleviates many of the sticking points of traditional YPAR; we were able to rely on each other for recruitment, finding space, obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, and moving through the phases of the research project.

From our many challenges, we also derived several recommendations for similar projects moving forward. Creating a firm but flexible timeline from the outset that runs throughout the entirety of the project would have made our project run more smoothly and would have ensured timelier completion. Although timelines are rarely strictly adhered to, having a more specific sense of when the editing process should begin and be finished would have enabled us to set more appropriate goals and deadlines. Additionally, allowing for the ramping up of skills, especially around the editing process, would help the project move to completion; had we selected several students and had them learn about editing techniques from the beginning of the project, they would have been up to speed by the time editing was needed. Finally, expecting the drop off in engagement and participation following the completion of filming would have potentially allowed us to build in additional events, activities, or workshops that would have continued interest and sustained the project's momentum.

In sum, our main lessons learned were the importance of strong partnerships and the need for key planning for multiple deadlines to ensure that interest and engagement did not flag throughout the process.

8.5 Conclusion

This arts-based research project that culminated in the filming of a documentary about the lives and experiences of trans and gender non-conforming youth of color offers many possibilities for deeper understanding and for the creation of health-promoting families, schools, and communities. Importantly, this documentary film project aligns itself with tenets of critical race theory in research, especially as it engages in counter-storytelling that draws on, centers, and highlights the experiences and knowledges of TGNC youth of color (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Although the research team may not have employed the language of critical race methodology, their work actively sought to address the intersecting forms of subjugation across race, class, gender, and sexual identities, giving voice to the complexities of experiences shaped not only by their gender identities but also by their racialized and classed identities (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Further, their work speaks back to the traditional, deficit-focused narrative of TGNC youth, acknowledging both their sources of strength and their hopes for the future. In these ways, the documentary film project offered participants the opportunity to engage in counter-storytelling, adding multivocal accounts that push back against majoritarian, privileged stories and accounts (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

Although we encountered many challenges and are still in the process of finalizing the film, this research project makes clear the importance of using art as a medium to capture what traditional research methods might leave unexplored and unexpressed. Documentary film—and art, more broadly—may offer new inroads into work that aims to offer a more complete and complex understanding of people's lived experiences. These methods may offer “new ways to see” (Leavy 2015, p. 291) and new ways to understand what is seen. More traditional research methods may omit certain aspects of TGNC youth's experiences and may render salient moments invisible (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2008); the documentary film may function as a source of data that highlights and celebrates these salient moments (Parr 2007). The sharp intake of breath before a participant shares a story of familial rejection, the broad smile as a participant talks about her future as an aesthetician, the cautious look to the ground as a participant offers advice to their former self—these subtle nuances and quiet moments are often obscured in the written word. Documentary film relies on these moments as text and as data, capturing the nuance and subtlety that often goes unspoken and unacknowledged in other work. Further, documentary film as a medium welcomes a broader audience than more traditional academic

research products do (Leavy 2015); although the film has only had very limited release, its audience has included more diverse thinkers and viewers than a journal article would. The research team aimed to appeal to a wide audience that included TGNC youth, their parents and teachers, and those who had no prior knowledge of gender theory, and documentary film as a medium offered them that opportunity.

Moreover, by including the population of interest in every step of the research process, we were able to create a richer, more meaningful text that ultimately offers many ways forward for the health of trans and gender non-conforming youth. By engaging in participatory video that enabled TGNC youth to share their experiences and thoughts directly with the audience, the research team created a final product that harnessed the transformative potential of documentary film (Kindon 2003). As many scholars have argued, participatory video offers an important and natural means of making manifest complicated concepts and realities, especially unearthing aspects of experience that may be harder to access through more traditional, hierarchical, researcher-centered projects (Braden and Mayo 1999; Kidd 1994; Mitchell et al. 2012). Traditional researchers may not think to ask questions that the TGNC youth did, may not recognize the answers in the way that the research team did, or may not put forward the often-messy and still-forming conversation as the youth did. The research team focused on sharing their truths with the audience, rather than representing themselves in ways that a traditional researcher could acknowledge and incorporate into the researcher's work. This necessarily has implications for the knowledge produced and the research product. This participatory video may also open space for societal transformation as it offers a way of allowing research subjects to direct the audience's gaze and control the audience's understanding of the subjects' experiences (Kindon 2003). This radical restructuring of the research process not only transfers power to those who may otherwise be powerless within a traditional research paradigm, but it also enables the types of discussions that may give rise to material changes in the lives of TGNC youth.

As the documentary film continues post-production and is eventually released to the public, the research team will further its goal of providing a platform for individuals who are often overlooked or unheard to control their own audiovisual reality and representation. For all of its shortcomings and challenges, the research team set out to create a document that offers nuance and insight into lives that are often rendered flat and two-dimensional, and the collaborative, arts-based method they chose allowed them the power to turn those dreams into a reality.

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