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An arts-based, peer-mediated Story Board Narrative Method in research on identity, belonging and future aspirations of forced migrant youth

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Abstract

An innovative, arts-based, peer-mediated Story Board Narrative method of data collection in an ongoing, multi-sited Youth Migration Project is described. The research explores negotiated identity, belonging and future aspirations of forced migrants aged 11 to 17 years old living temporarily in Thailand and Malaysia. The unique data collection method centres meaning making by youth about their forced migration and adaptation in often hostile and precarious conditions. Primary data are youths' narrative accounts of an arts-based Story Board that each youth creates over a four week period and then presents to a small group of migrant peers. Follow-up sessions invite youth to revise their Story-Board and their narrative, with inquiry led by peers rather than research facilitators. The method positions youth as experts and in control of their own stories. Story Board Narratives are audio-taped, transcribed, and content analyzed by a team of investigators who also have migration experiences. Unlike other visual methods that prescribe drawings and focus on the visual production, this method allows youth to direct their own visual representations and the narrative associated with them. The method enables a developmental process whereby youths' introspection, discussions, and representations of the impacts of forced migration evolve over time. This emergent, participatory, arts-based method as the centerpiece in a mixed method research design yields richly nuanced and often unexpected findings that may not have been generated through methods that are more prescriptive, structured, investigator-centered, and deductive.

Keywords: Story Board, Narrative, Arts-based Research, Visual methods, Forced migrants, Refugees, Youth, Youth-centred, Mixed methods

Introduction

A peer-mediated, Story-Board Narrative (SBN) procedure is described in this article as a promising new approach to research exploring the experiences of migrant youth. The method combines the known advantages of methods that are both visual and that call upon participants to give detailed, free-flowing accounts of the meanings they ascribe to their migration experiences in terms of identity, belonging, and implications for their future. The method also appears to have transformative impacts which participants noted as an unexpected benefit. This article begins with an overview of the research project for which the SBN method was devised, called the Youth Migration Project and describes how the method has been implemented. The method is then considered in the context of other arts-based research methods which, when integrated with mixed methods research, have potential to create new knowledge about the impacts of forced migration on young people. The distinctiveness of the SBN method as a more developmental, dynamic, and youth-centred approach compared to other methods is discussed. Finally, the article comments on the potential for the SBN method to be adapted and used in future research and psychosocial interventions with forced migrant and refugee youth.

Arts-based research

Arts-based research is now generally accepted in social science research (Carless & Douglas, 2016). In arts-based research, three broad categories of methods—hand-made, digital, and performance—are used to collect, generate, analyse, and/or disseminate data (Fraser & Sayah, 2011; Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2011; Tao & Mitchell, 2011). Typically the participants produce the artwork, and the art may be used as the primary data for interpretation. In some research, artwork is understood as a form of text to be interpreted, and serves a catalytic function either in one-to-one discussions about an individual's artwork (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2011) or in group discussions about collective experiences (e.g., Bianchi, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997). For instance, Wang (2016) describes art-based narrative interviewing in which participants draw while being interviewed. It is based on the presumption that drawing facilitates the participatory process and invites consideration of “intersubjective truths” (p. 41). Dialogue is also the primary research data in methods using photographs as a catalyst for discussion, such as photovoice (Tao & Mitchell, 2010) and photo elicitation (Samuels, 2007). Clover (2011) comments that in arts-based research, the goal of art is usually to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions or received knowledge, or at least open these up to consider more (often suppressed) vantage points and ways of knowing about the human experience under investigation. In the Youth Migration Project, an arts-based method was chosen as a catalyst for youth to provide in-depth accounts of their migration experience and its impacts on key aspects of their development. The Youth Migration Project drew on a rights-based framework that centres youth's own understandings of their rights, goals, and psychosocial needs and assists them to make their views known (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). The goal is to generate a more

differentiated and nuanced understanding of youth who are forced to migrate to disrupt or at least provide a balance to prevalent, adult-centred, monolithic representations of young forced migrants as passive, developmentally derailed or victims lacking agency or voice. The Youth Migration Project is positioned within the broad field of applied developmental psychology and the broad perspectives of sociocultural theory, transnationalism, and deconstructionism. Resting on decolonizing, critical and feminist epistemologies, it combines arts-based research and mixed methods research (e.g., see Archibald & Gerber, 2018).

Research context

The SBN method was created by the author for use in the Youth Migration Project, involving forced migrant youth aged 11 to 17 years living temporarily in Malaysia and Thailand. The project explores how youth continuously re-negotiate their identity, sense of belonging and future aspirations over the course of their migration journeys, which often extend over several years and countries. Living without access to normative entitlements, compounded by specific traumas, it is generally understood that many forced migrant and refugee youth suffer from loss of a sense of self-worth, belonging, and hope for their future (International Organization for Migration, 2017; Pejovic-Milovancevic et al., 2018). The SBN method was devised as a medium for youth to represent their journeys, including how they make meaning of their exodus from their home country and adapt in often hostile and precarious conditions in transit. Primary data are youths' narrative accounts of their migration 'Story Board.' Combining arts-based research with mixed methods research, data collection is also carried out through questionnaires, observations, and document review. To date, participants have included 52 girls and boys from Myanmar, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen, living in Malaysia with the status of 'illegal aliens.' Sixty per cent of youth participants were proficient in English, the other 40 per cent had rudimentary English and required a translator or an investigative team member who spoke the same language as they did.

Story Board Narrative Method

Through a purposive sampling method, youth who are forced migrants are recruited through informal schools and social service centres such that participants are already familiar with some other youth in the research sample. Youth self-select into peer groups of 4 to 8 members, usually on the basis of their age, school group, or primary language. Each youth is provided with a kit of art supplies (e.g., coloured pens and pencils, glue, scissors, paint, coloured papers, cloth, etc.) and a large, durable poster board (approximately 50cm X 80cm). It is emphasized that no art skills are needed: the goal is not to create an 'artistic', aesthetically pleasing, linear or complete piece of art per se. Instead, youth are encouraged to be as creative, messy, gestural or orderly as needed to communicate their experiences, and they are shown Story Board examples



Participant in the Youth Migration Project. Photo credit: Lamouchi/Tse/Ball

illustrating different approaches. They are asked to represent their migration journeys, and especially their sense of who they are, where they belong, and how they envision their future. Initial peer group meetings are used to facilitate discussion among the youth about what these concepts might mean. However, these concepts are deliberately left open-ended to avoid pre-empting the meanings youth ascribe to them or how they might wish to express and integrate them into their Story Board and subsequent narrative. Each peer group meets weekly for four to five weeks, first to receive the materials and discuss the task and main concepts, and subsequently to hear each member's narrative account. Participants volunteer to present their Story Board when they feel ready to show and explain it. Each SBN takes from 10 to 45 minutes. After a SBN, peers in the small group ask the narrator questions seeking clarifications, examples or elaborations of aspects of the story. A research team member facilitates this process and it ends with the facilitator asking the narrator questions. SBNs, including the peer mediation process, are audio-taped, transcribed, and content analyzed by a team of investigators who also have migration experiences. In the iterative-inductive manner of grounded theory building (Glaser, 1992), informal review of an SBN transcript typically gives rise to questions for the narrator, which are pursued in a follow-up session led by a research team member either individually or in the peer group setting. During the follow-up session, youth are invited to add to or revise their Story Board and their narrative. This opportunity for revision was initiated after some of the youth asked if

they could make ongoing changes to their Story Board. Follow-up sessions are also audio-taped, transcribed, and content analysed.

Advantages of the Story Board Narrative method

The main purpose of arts-based research is its generative and potentially transformative potential (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012). The SBN method is an alternative to investigator-driven and institution-centred data collection procedures. Studies of migrants and refugees often pursue questions relevant to institutional agendas such as humanitarian aid, education assistance, and government surveillance, employment policies, child welfare or detention practices. Increasingly, critical, decolonial and feminist perspectives have demonstrated the potential for fresh perspectives and insights to flow from using research methods that make visible and audible the experiences and accounts of marginalized and silenced people, including migrants and asylum seekers (e.g., Haaken & O'Neill, 2014). Youth Migration Project participants have commented that the use of the SBN method enables them to tell their own stories in their own words, according to their own timeline, sequence, and level of detail - including or leaving out aspects of experiences as they wish. Parts of the Story Board that appear left out of the narrative are significant, and peers often inquire about these omissions. Probes and encouragements are led by peers rather than the researchers: what peers find in common, interesting, humorous, or disturbing is also illuminating for the research. arts-based research does not claim to objectively represent experiences, but rather engages subjectively with participants through "critical cultural engagement" (Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2012, p. 240).

Unlike many arts-based methods, which focus on the visual product and rely upon an outside 'expert's' inferences about it, the visual production in the SBN method is mainly a stimulus and reference point for a youth's narrative account and their peers' musings about it. The SBN method reflects the premise of the Youth Migration Project that forced migrant youth are always social actors and active subjects, not powerless or passive victims: youth demonstrate agency when creating their Story Board from a blank canvas, selecting what to highlight, how to explain its meanings, what to elaborate upon and what to hold back. This process overcomes power imbalances that exist in traditional research methods which often constrain agency by prescribing what or how to draw, paint, photograph, or write about, or use prepared questionnaire, interview or focus group protocols. Each youth is positioned as the expert in making meaning of their own migration and its impacts, and is in control of their story. The SBN method makes room for non-linear, non-discursive, and metaphorical representations of experience as youth creatively find and refine ways to open their private experiences of migration to the empathic scrutiny of migrant peers and researchers. What emerges through art may not have become known if participants had to start with oral or written language alone (Van Lith, 2014). It provides an opportunity for youth with various home languages, or with little oral fluency due to trauma, to start with a visual medium to convey their story. Yet, the youth's narratives and responses to peers'

probing questions and empathic reflections have yielded deeply revealing and nuanced accounts of their experience than the visual production itself. In the SBN process, youth generally do not restrict their narrative to explaining the images on their Story Board; as they explain one part of their board, their narrative often deepens to include background information, thoughts, feelings, and other associations. In the traditions of arts-based research and mixed methods research, central use of the SBN data aims to create new knowledge about forced migration in the intersubjective space where meaning making is co-produced by the narrator, their peers, and a facilitator who is also a migrant.



Participant in the Youth Migration Project. Photo credit: Lamouchi/Tse/Ball

Other visual methods typically collect and interpret productions obtained at a single time point. While this may be the only option in some situations where the setting is chaotic or where migrants are rapidly moving on, there is a risk of conveying that the ways they make meaning of their experience or its impacts are static, rather than constantly evolving. With the SBN method, youth work to fill up their Story Boards incrementally over several weeks, adding and changing elements and occasionally starting over with a new board. The SBN bears some similarities to the use of visual arts in a therapeutic workshop procedure developed specifically for refugee youth called the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006; Stiles, 2019). This procedure invites youth to visually represent and then narrate their migration experiences through the provided metaphors of trees and forests (Jacobs, 2018; Stiles et al., 2019). Studies suggest that youth respond positively to this procedure and that it can promote healing and connection to other refugee youth. In contrast to the SBN method, the Tree of Life procedure asks youth to

fit their experiences into provided metaphors and categories, and it is done at one point in time. The longer time period used for the SBN method allows for a developmental and dynamic process, in which a youth can elaborate their self-representation over time and across multiple discursive opportunities with peers, the research team, and others as they plan what and how to represent their story on a blank canvas.

Several youth have commented that the task of filling up a blank canvas is daunting at first, and calls them to think deeply about how various aspects of their experiences have impacted how they see themselves, where they belong, and future possibilities. For example, one youth arrived at the first SBN sharing session with her Story Board blank. This was part of her story: she explained that in her home country, Afghanistan, she was “a person”, and now she is “a non-person”. She described how she actively suppresses memories and feelings about her home and migration experience. After three weeks listening and responding to her peers’ SBNs, she began to fill up her Story Board, expressing excitement and relief in doing so, as if waking from hibernation. She was among several other youth who asked if they could continue to work on their Story Board after their participation in the project was over. Thus, the SBN method acknowledged youths’ dynamic, developmental process in which their stories are ever-changing. Youth are on the move and so are their stories, identities, sense of belonging and future possibilities.

Illustrative outcomes of the SBN method

Findings of the Youth Migration Project will be reported elsewhere. Yet it is useful to exemplify a few insights yielded by the SBN method that may not have emerged by relying on more structured, traditional methods. (1) Youth overwhelmingly describe their response to migration as a project including certain presuppositions, values, external constraints and opportunities, goals, tasks, and sought-after outcomes. (2) Youth describe the tremendous physical and psychological toll exacted by armed conflict, gender-based violence, and persecution in their home countries and life in generally hostile communities and a country that views them as illegal aliens. (3) Youth describe that migration is challenging yet also filled with new opportunities, especially for girls. (4) When youth are seriously struggling, the most significant sources of ongoing emotional distress and sense of instability are the negative changes that migration creates for family relationships, and the risk of long-term detention of adult family members who are working illegally to support their family. (5) For migrant youth, the primary source of social support, information needed to adapt, and hope for the future is their peer group, which is similar to sedentary youth in high income countries who are the subjects of most mainstream developmental research. (6) Exile often fuels a long-term goal to help others in the home country through human service work or political activism. As other exploratory studies of forced migrant and refugee children have suggested (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2016), living in extremely difficult circumstances does not necessarily mean that all youth will experience only subtractive effects on their identity, belonging, and future aspirations development and wellness.

Participants in the Youth Migration Project describe additive effects of their mobility and immersion in unfamiliar social, cultural and linguistic ecologies while in transit.

The SBN appears to normalize youths' experiences of struggle and their persisting optimism despite difficult circumstances, resulting in a positive impact on their mental health and social support. There is limited evidence about the psychosocial development, mental health or effects of interventions for youth who are still in transit. Most evidence-based interventions for forced migrant youth are based on Euro-Western concepts and implemented with youth after they are resettled (Bennouna et al., 2019; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). In the Youth Migration Project, youth have described how creating a Story Board, sharing their "back story" and current context of their mood and behaviours, and hearing responses from peers with similar experiences, gives them a tremendous sense of relief and normalizing reassurance. Youth have described feeling relieved to "get the story I keep telling in my head out" and "having my friends and you take real time to listen to how I try to make sense of what's happened and what I'm trying to do about my situation." Youth welcome hearing their peers' stories and feeling: "Now I know that I am not the only one who struggles [from being a migrant]."

They described increased empathy for their migrant peers as a consequence of hearing and responding to their SBNs. Yet the SBN is less intimate, foreign, and costly than an explicitly therapeutic intervention, which might also be seen by some youth as too intrusive or deficit-focused. Service practitioners who have assisted in recruiting participants have also commented on the positive impacts of participating in the Youth Migration Project on youth. They have noted that the method appears to help youth "open up" about their experiences, and that the SBN method is culturally safe, strength-based, feasible in terms of the capacity of local service practitioners to learn the method, and practical in terms of the resources required.

Future applications

The SBN method is promising for research involving a variety of populations, particularly those having ongoing experiences that have unsettled their sense of self and belonging. It is particularly useful for those who may need a more self-paced, incremental, and non-verbal way to begin to represent and prepare to share their story compared to a single session visual arts procedure or an oral interview or focus group. Given unprecedented numbers of forced migrant youth globally (UNICEF, 2016), there is an urgent need to incorporate their perspectives in research in order to understand their experiences, needs, and goals. In terms of knowledge creation, there is much to learn from forced migrant youth about psychosocial development when a young person's world has been destabilized and their identities, belonging and futures have been disrupted through forced migration. The developmental, dynamic, youth-centred SBN method has promised an open-ended opportunity for youth to demonstrate their agency and for theorists to access the meaning-making processes of youth on the move.



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