

Research Methods for Sport/Leisure and Social Justice

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Introduction

As Smith, *et al.* (2023) suggest, research in sport (as well as leisure we would argue) has traditionally been carried out *on* people, doing things *to* them or describing and explaining their experiences *for* them. Such research is then often published in academic journals, often with arguably limited impact beyond that on the immediate academic community. In this chapter, we argue that social justice research involves doing research *with* people, collaborating at all stages of the research process in order to facilitate full and equal participation of all groups in sport, and an equitable allocation of resources (Chapman and Schwartz, 2012). Undertaking social justice research presents a number of theoretical, methodological and personal challenges, especially with regards to issues such as positionality, power relations and reflexivity (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019). Whilst some of these challenges are to some extent present in most research, this chapter explores some of those specific challenges faced by the researcher with an interest in sport, leisure and social justice. The focus of the chapter is upon what Atkins and Duckworth (2019) define as “*socially just research*”. By this, they refer to research that is not simply about social justice, but rather research that is socially just in the way that it is undertaken, compared to “research for social justice”, which although still seeking to uncover, illuminate or explain issues of social justice in sport and leisure, will do so with less reflection on the research process. This focus does not imply that socially just research is in any way superior to research for social justice, however socially just research does have what we would argue to be a unique set of challenges and opportunities for the researcher.

The Ethics of Social Justice Research

It is useful to start with a brief discussion of the ethics of socially just research. Whilst all research is (or should be) concerned with ethics, the ethical dimension of social justice research is, we would argue, of paramount importance, and goes beyond the issues that would normally be associated with gaining ethical approval, such as not causing harm, the need for

informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity of participants and storage of data. Whilst these are, of course, still an essential aspect of the research process for the social justice researcher, it is important to go beyond them, especially given that a mechanistic focus on gaining institutional approval may actually limit a deeper acknowledgement of, and reflection upon the ethics of the overall research process (Greenbank, 2003). Traditional ethics approval processes also, it could be argued, lead to the researcher focusing on the ethics of the project, rather than the participants, whereby issues such as those related to data storage take precedence over the concerns, background and positioning of those participating. As Petit (2020, p1) notes, reflection on deeper issues may be subsumed by the need to “neatly package research concerns; locate mitigating solutions before problems emerge through ethics approvals and committees; discuss issues within the confines of short methodology sections before moving on to ‘important’ discussions of findings”. As such, the consideration of ethics for social justice research goes far beyond simplistic “do no harm” assessments, and instead of separated from the research process become embedded within all aspects not just as a tool to avoid harm, but instead as a means to carefully consider and enhance the chosen methodology so that the research may be seen to instead “do good”. One key aspect of this lies in the relationships between researcher, and those being researched, and the need for a collaborative, co-produced approach to research.

Epistemic Violence and Socially Just Research

Following on from the ethics of social justice research, it is important to introduce the concept of epistemic violence. This concept developed from Foucault’s work surrounding the ‘episteme in Western thought ... as ‘the anonymous codification and structure which determines the knowledge formation of a given epoch’ (Bartels, *et al.* 2019, p. 1). In other words, who determines legitimate knowledge and how do they legitimise it? The answers lie with who has power and dominance. Perhaps it is the post-colonial feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who illuminates the details of epistemic violence through her work entitled – ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988). The point she makes concerns who constructs knowledge of the ‘other’ and how do they construct it. For Spivak, the knowledge created about the ‘subaltern’, in particular black and brown women and girls living in countries that are colonised by white people, is produced through the lens of whiteness, imperialism and the colonial. So, for example, Ratna and Samie (2017) in their work on race, gender and sport demonstrate ‘the largely positivistic, androcentric, assimilationist, ethnocentric and Eurocentric thinking which has colonised much of the scholarship in the sociology of sport’

(p. 10), vis-à-vis women of colour. As such, women of colour have been denied an episteme—the starting place for knowledge formation—that is free from white Western processes, constructs and production of knowledge.

Critical engagement with the concept epistemic violence does not apply only to social justice research concerned with race, ethnicity, gender and sport/leisure research, it can be applied to research that involves disability, international relations, sport for development and peace, and potentially sport mega events to name a few. For example, disabled scholars Ymous *et al.* (2020) write:

Epistemic violence is violence against one's status as a knower; one's role as a creator and communicator of knowledge. It is the dismissal of people as credible sources of information, because of our presumptions about them, or because of how their communicative means (or what they have to communicate) clashes with how we would like to believe the world works (p. 3)

In their paper on disability related technology research, disabled researchers Ymous *et al.* offer a series of vignettes to demonstrate how they 'still face regular ableism' (p. 9) because of ableist ways of knowing and ableist research agendas. Additionally, they argue that in the technology research field:

... the perspectives of disabled people are actively erased in multiple ways: sometimes framed as 'personal' and 'emotional' and 'unscientific', sometimes due to a privileging of "medical expert" knowledge and carer's needs ... (p. 9).

It is their challenge provides an example of how research that might be deemed social justice research is not necessarily socially just research when it comes to the philosophical ethics underpinning ontology and epistemology.

A similar challenge has been discussed in sport and leisure research, particularly in Sport for Development and Peace (e.g., Darnell and Millington, 2018) in terms of the decolonial (Hayhurst, 2016) and orientalism (Darnell, 2014). Brunner (2021) in her interrogation of International Relations offers a detailed and lengthy account of epistemic violence, demonstrating that it is inherent within the disciplinary field. In her call to 'un /doing' epistemic violence (p. 207), she focuses on a delinking from dominant paradigms through 'decentring and re-signifying conventional Eurocentric assumptions ...' (p. 208). Chilisa and Mertens (2021) offer an example of how this can be achieved in regard to the Sustainable

Development Goals and the Western cultural lens that determines their evaluation. Chilisa and Mertens (2021) take a Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) approach because:

It is a deliberate attempt to adapt evaluation tools, instruments, strategies, and theory models, as well as to develop evaluation practice, theory, and methodologies emanating from local cultures, Indigenous knowledge systems, African philosophies, and African world views ... (p. 245).

Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies are emerging in sport and leisure research. For example, recent work critically analyses the ways historical narrative and ‘the archive’/‘Imperial Archive’ produce knowledge that reflects the ‘dominant epistemologies of colonial(ist) sport history’ (MacLean, 2019, p. 189).

Epistemic violence is an important concept and process when we think about, devise and design socially just sport and leisure research projects. Ontology and epistemology are the starting places when it comes to the creation of knowledge. It is important that these starting places are socially just and not violating research participants as legitimate knowers, free from tradition and established paradigmatic assumptions of how knowledge can and cannot be produced.

Co-production and Socially Just Research in Sport and Leisure

The ideas of co-productive, participative and collaborative research are clearly important to social justice research but also to some extent contested in terms of their meaning and application. The idea of co-production is crucial in this regard. As Smith, *et al.* (2023, p.160) argue

how can researchers work with individuals or groups typically referred to in the literature as lay people, stakeholders, value holders, citizens, service users, patients, public contributors, community members, and (end) knowledge users? How can those with such lived experience be afforded more power in academia to ensure that research agendas and outputs address their needs, concerns, and preferences? How can research be done with or led by partners in ways that are transformative, equitable, and impactful? How can we take more seriously knowledge translation and ensure that evidence informs action and theory informs practice? Whilst not without its

complications or challenges, co-production has been put forward as a way of achieving all of this and more

Rather than aim for a single encompassing definition of co-production, Smith *et al.* (2023) go on to suggest that researchers should identify their choice of approach, and allow their research to be evaluated against that choice. The two types of co-production that relate most closely to social justice research are firstly *Integrated Knowledge Translation*, where researchers work collaboratively with stakeholders in a dynamic and iterative way throughout the entire research process, from developing aims and objectives, to collecting analysing and interpreting data, and implementing recommendations emerging from the research, which although having the potential to reduce the time period between research and implementation (Schaillée, et al. 2018), may also benefit from being slow and protracted (Ugolotti, 2022).

There are three types of translation practices (Clavier, et al., 2012), these being cognitive translation, focusing upon the meanings and content of the research, focusing on developing a shared vision for the aims of the research, strategic translation, focusing upon maintaining stakeholder interest and involvement in the research process, and logistic translation, involving the pragmatics of the research, for example handling budgets, or setting deadlines. Each of these benefit from intensive contact between researcher and stakeholders, allowing trust and shared learning, the dissemination of findings beyond “traditional” academic outputs, and gaining external, rather than internal funding to undertake the research (Schaillée, et al. 2018).

A second type of co-production is *Equitable and Experientially Informed Research*, perhaps the most common form within sport based contexts (Brinkley, *et al.* 2022). Whilst Integrated Knowledge Transfer may include collaborators with a lived experience of the issues being explored, for equitable and experientially informed research their involvement is an absolute necessity. This idea of participative research, and more specifically Participatory Action Research (PAR) emphasises the participation of, and action in research by the community (Atkins and Duckworth, 2109). This should go beyond simply developing relationships with the community so that they may, for example, allow access to data or explanation of key findings. Instead, as Spaaij et al (2018) argue, it is much more than simply allowing participants to take part in the study. For true participatory research, Spaaij, *et al.* note that there has to be alignment of power and control, positioning participants as “knowledgeable actors” (p.26) at all stages of the research, from developing research aims to implementing

any outcomes from the research. This final element is crucial within participatory research that takes a more activist stance, with participants able to take an active role in addressing the social inequalities that affect their circumstances.

Spaaij *et al.* (2018) go on to identify a three-dimensional model of participatory research. The three inter-related dimensions are:

1. The degree of participation – This refers to the extent to which participants are actively involved in the research as knowledgeable actors, possessing some power within the research process. Participation may be assessed firstly by scale, in terms of number of participants involved. When assessing the scale of involvement, it is important to not only explore numbers involved, but also the extent to which those privileged and those marginalised within the community being researched have a voice.
2. The reconceptualization of power relations – unlike more “traditional” means of research, participants are seen as active and able members of the research team, and as such, researchers become facilitators and collaborators.
3. Reflexivity that goes beyond more common approaches that focus on the researcher’s own identity-related characteristics, such as race, gender and so on, to a form of reflexivity that reflect upon the ideas of power and difference, and their role within the research process.

Petican, *et al.* (2023) outline the challenges and opportunities in developing such co-produced research. Some of the key lessons were those of proactively building relationships that reconceptualise existing power relations, developing safe and collaborative spaces where voices that might otherwise not be heard have the opportunity to contribute, and trusting the process, especially in terms of the “messy” and emergent nature of such collaboration through a discursive approach

Choosing Methods

Although some methods may be more challenging to use in a socially just way, that should neither rule some methods out, nor assign primacy to others. Whilst qualitative approaches dominate, there is still space for more positivist designs, although these tend to be restricted in terms of their ability to lead to truly collaborative and participatory research. They may also have a tendency to rationalise and reproduce existing structures and cultures (Dantley,

2002), and fail to acknowledge individual experiences, in the pursuit of a single “truth” (Krane and Waldron, 2021) rather than the subjective realities of participants. Interpretative approaches to research are often characterised by their flexible and emergent nature. This should, ideally, be done as a collaborative exercise. Sandford, *et al.* (2020), for example in their study of sport, disability and an inclusive educational programme worked closely with a charity – Cambridge House – in a co-constructed research programme, where both academics and charity worked “collaboratively with Cambridge House, maintaining an ongoing conversation, with a commitment to sharing information that could assist in refining programme objectives, activities and intended outcomes” (p154-155) to provide critical insights to improve the experience of participants.

The crucial questions for the researcher to ask are:

- What information do we need?
- What methods are able to provide the data to give us this information based on the epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning the research?
- Are these methods readily accessible to all participants?
- Do these methods allow research to be participatory, rather than one way?
- How should these methods be used to ensure that they do not cause either social or psychological harm to participants?
- Am I making assumptions about participants, for example in terms of their expertise or knowledge?
- What will be the effect of the chosen method on each participant?
- How will participants themselves be involved in the questions that are asked?

If these questions are reflected upon, then it is clear that the choice of methods is something that should emerge through working with the community, rather than determined *a priori*. Thus, questions could be asked of a researcher who consistently adheres to a single method or design at the expense of a more emergent, flexible design.

Despite growing diversity of methods, research into the sociology of sport and leisure is still dominated by interview, focus group and to a lesser extent, questionnaire based designs. These are also methods that may prove problematic to the socially just researcher. Although questionnaires may be useful to collect qualitative data, for example when they allow greater access to participants, whose voices might be otherwise unheard, for example Ison’s (2009)

study of 18-25 year olds with Cerebral Palsy, or where sensitive topics are discussed, they may still exclude some, for example those with lower levels of literacy, or access to technology, and the data itself may lack the richness or depth (Braun, *et al.* 2020: Jones, 2021). The advantages of interviews in terms of flexibility, the ability to account for participants with differing characteristics, and ability to follow up and develop key insights have been well documented, but even then, they have a number of concerns to the socially just researcher, specifically in terms of the power balance between interviewer and interviewee. Sometimes this may be addressed, for example using focus groups with children may reduce power issues that would occur with one to one interviews. Alternative methods are becoming increasingly common, and visual methods such as photo elicitation or digital storytelling are seen as beneficial in their ability to address and deconstruct power relations, promote community participation, and promote alternatives to “traditional” methods rooted in colonial and imperial practices (McSweeney, *et al.*, 2023). Ugolotti (2022), for example, in his study of the relevance of parkour to young men of migrant origins in Italy included both photo-elicitation, as well as the co-creation and co-production of a documentary film with his participants, allowing a truly rich and collaborative picture to emerge of their experiences. As well as what methods are used, the question of how they are used can also be explored to reduce discomfort, for example Hussain and Cunningham (2020), in their study of marginalised Pakistani women in sport were able to use Skype interviews. Whilst the often cited benefits of proximity in interviews, such as the ability to develop trust and rapport, were perhaps absent, this was outweighed by the participants being able to be at home, in their “comfort zone” (p1058).

Positionality and Reflexivity

The socially just researcher will have to reflect on a wide variety of questions regarding the choice and application of methods, as well as their own role as part of the research process. The questions that may be asked include:

- How do I reflect upon each participant, their unique characteristics, histories, experiences and expectations, rather than seeing participants as a homogenous sample?
- How do I act upon that reflection?

- How do my own characteristics, history and attitudes impact upon the research? In what way?
- How do I deal with potential perceived power imbalances between myself as researcher/expert and those being researched? How will such power balances impact participants.

It is also useful to recognise that reflexivity is a multi-layered concept, and this may help frame the researcher's discussion of positionality and reflexivity (Chiu, 2006; Nicholls, 2009). Self-reflexivity refers to the researcher's own position, assumptions, history and experiences. Inter-personal reflexivity addresses the researcher's role in terms of working with others, the relationships that are formed, and how the characteristics of the research may impact upon the research process. The final layer of reflexivity is that of collective reflexivity, which explores how the collaboration between those researching, and those being researched impacted upon the research aims and the research process, and the subsequent effects upon participants in terms of whether the research was affirming, empowering or transformative.

Hussein and Cunningham, (2021) in their research into how less well-known traditional sports offered opportunities for marginalized Pakistani women to participate in physical activity, are an example of how these issues can be explicitly acknowledged. They write, for example, how the primary investigator was a practicing Muslim, also from Pakistan with six years' experience of working with marginalised women from the region. They acknowledge that having a male interviewer, female interviewees were reluctant to discuss issues related to sexuality and abuse by men, yet more willing to talk about the negative role of the western world. Follow up questions were difficult if they addressed issues that were culturally inappropriate. Gender issues were highlighted in the reflexive journal:

The baggage of false gender superiority is not easy for a Muslim man like me to hide. I have been trained from my birth to dominate women, and the women are being victimized for generations by a man like me, I can feel in their voice tone, the pain caused by men like me. It is difficult to explain in words the emotional tension and unease even in the digital environment that the participants and I go through. I try my level best to make them comfortable. Still, it is an uphill task for a Pakistani Muslim man researcher to create trust (p.1056-7).

It is important to see such a discussion as not having an “end point”. Here the idea of “cultural humility” becomes useful. The term “cultural competence” has long been used within Sport Psychology, developing recognition that their clients should not be considered as a homogenous group, but more as “ a mosaic of people with diverse customs and cultures” (Arthur and McMahon, 2005, p.205). Whilst cultural competence is a useful concept to acknowledge such issues, there is a growing movement towards reframing the idea as cultural humility” (Krane and Waldron, 2021), with the argument moving from an assumed end point (as implied by the term “competence”) to an acknowledgement that such reflection is never complete, either in terms of the experiences of the researcher, or those being researched.

Analysing Data

Whilst the actual processes of data analysis for social justice research, whether that be through rich description, thematic analysis, or more quantitative forms of analysis will not necessarily differ, there needs to be coherence between the methods, designed to elicit and illuminate participant voices, and the analysis, which should ensure that those voices are both present and accurately presented. This goes beyond the more commonly used approach of ‘member checking’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1986), whereby conclusions may be “tested” by participants confirming, or otherwise, the accuracy and interpretations of the data. Instead, it is important that analysis, as with the other elements of the research process, is seen as a collaborative process, with participants actively involved in the analysis of data where possible. In social justice research, however, such a practice may not always be productive, as power relations may lead participants to simply agree with the researcher’s conclusions (Buchbinder, 2011), or there may even be the possibility of causing harm to participants (Candela, 2109) depending on the findings. Finally, participants may lack technical knowledge, for example with any quantitative analysis, to have a full role in the analysis of the data. Where participants are able to play an active role in the analysis of the data, however, the benefits are twofold. Firstly, the quality of the research in terms of such concepts as credibility and authenticity may be enhanced. Secondly, it respects that the data comes from the participants, and that they have had an active role in its production, and thus should, ethically, have a similar role in its analysis to ensure that their voices are accurately represented.

Presenting Research

The writing up and dissemination of social justice research goes beyond that normally associated with more traditional academic outputs, notably the journal article, book or conference paper. For example, working with a local organisation called Energise Me, Bournemouth University staff Jayne Caudwell and Daniel Lock completed Sport England-funded research that focused on ‘Pride in our Workforce’, which was designed to explore:

1. The role the workforce plays in the LGBT+ community accessing Physical Activity and Sport and how the workforce affects and influences their experience as a participant.
2. How the actual and perceived barriers to participation can be identified and overcome by a workforce that has the skills, competencies and behaviours needed to engage the LGBT+ community, to increase participation in high quality physical activity experiences.
3. Whether the current workforce is representative of our local population and, if not, how we can increase the number of people from the LGBT+ community within the workforce.

The results from the on-line survey, focus group and interview research are captured in an industry-type report that is accessible to the local physical activity workforce involved in the study. The research underpins a globally available Internet resource that captures the findings and provides Pride in our Workforce scenario slides. See:

<https://www.energiseme.org/funding-support/insight-guides/pride-in-our-workforce-resource/>

It is the animation of the findings through illustrations taken during the focus groups that enable engagement beyond the standard academic output.



Figure One – Illustrating Focus Groups

Issues of “Exit”

The issue of “exit” from the research process is something that is often overlooked in all research, yet takes on a special resonance in socially just research. Essentially a key question to be asked by the researcher is not just “how do I collect my data”, but that of “once I have collected my data, how do I exit the relationship between myself and my participants in an ethical and respectful way?”. Too often, this is an overlooked part of the research process, yet is inherently important within socially just research, where “leaving the field” without careful consideration of the impact upon participants may have considerable ethical implications, especially given our arguments that, by its very nature, socially just research is a collaborative endeavour. Whilst the emergent and flexible nature of qualitative research designs makes it difficult to plan when exit will take place, the question of how it should happen should be considered at the start of the research process. The issues related to exit from the research setting have been outlined by Ortiz (2004) who, although undertaking research from a social justice perspective, has outlined some of the key concerns and strategies. Immersing himself almost entirely in the social world of athletes’ wives, where “their world was my world for more than three years” (p.470). Both the level of long-term immersion, and the perceived vulnerability of participants became obstacles to withdrawal, as did the empowerment felt by participants, which motivated them to continue their

involvement. As he notes, “ Because we worked well together, shared our feelings, and shared a sharp sense of mutuality in our quest for knowledge, the depth of reciprocity in our exchange relationships made it difficult for me to stop the data collection process” (p. 475). This issue is vital for any socially just researcher, who must carefully consider what will happen to the relationships that will form throughout such a collaborative research process.

Developing Impact

Praxis refers to a continual process of action and reflection upon the research process to develop a commitment to transformation through bringing to life the relationships between theory and practice to make positive changes to the lives of marginalised people based on the voices and experiences of those people (Blodgett, et al. 2008). Thus, the questions asked within a social justice praxis can be summarised as firstly who benefits from the research, and in what way, secondly who developed the research design that led to those benefits, and finally who narrates those benefits, and in which format.

Socially just research can develop impact beyond academic outputs through engaging with the community. For example, research with a local transgender group and their participation in recreational swimming involved the production of drawings and illustrations. These visual images were displayed during LGBT+ History Month (2020) at a Regional Arts centre – the Lighthouse Poole, Dorset and the public were encouraged to offer their feedback.

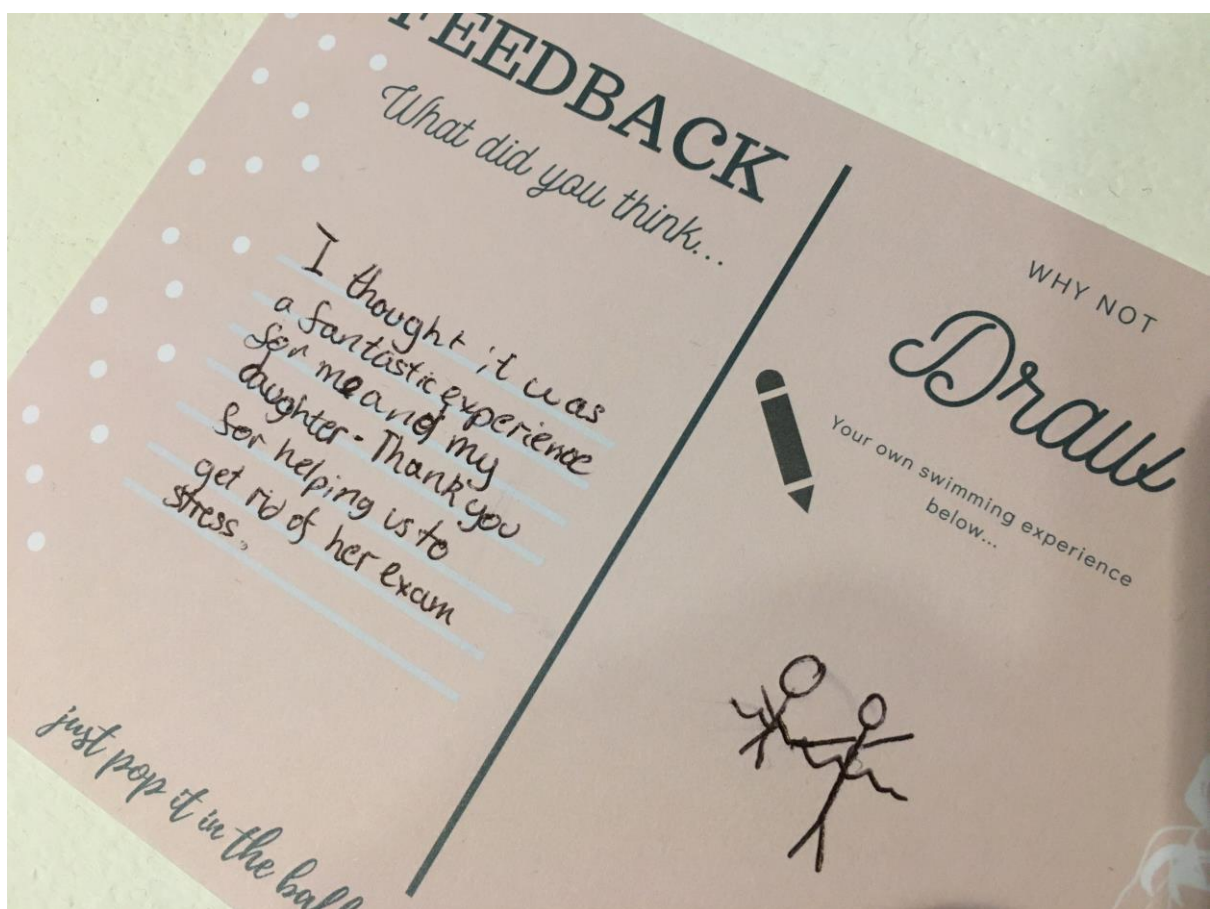
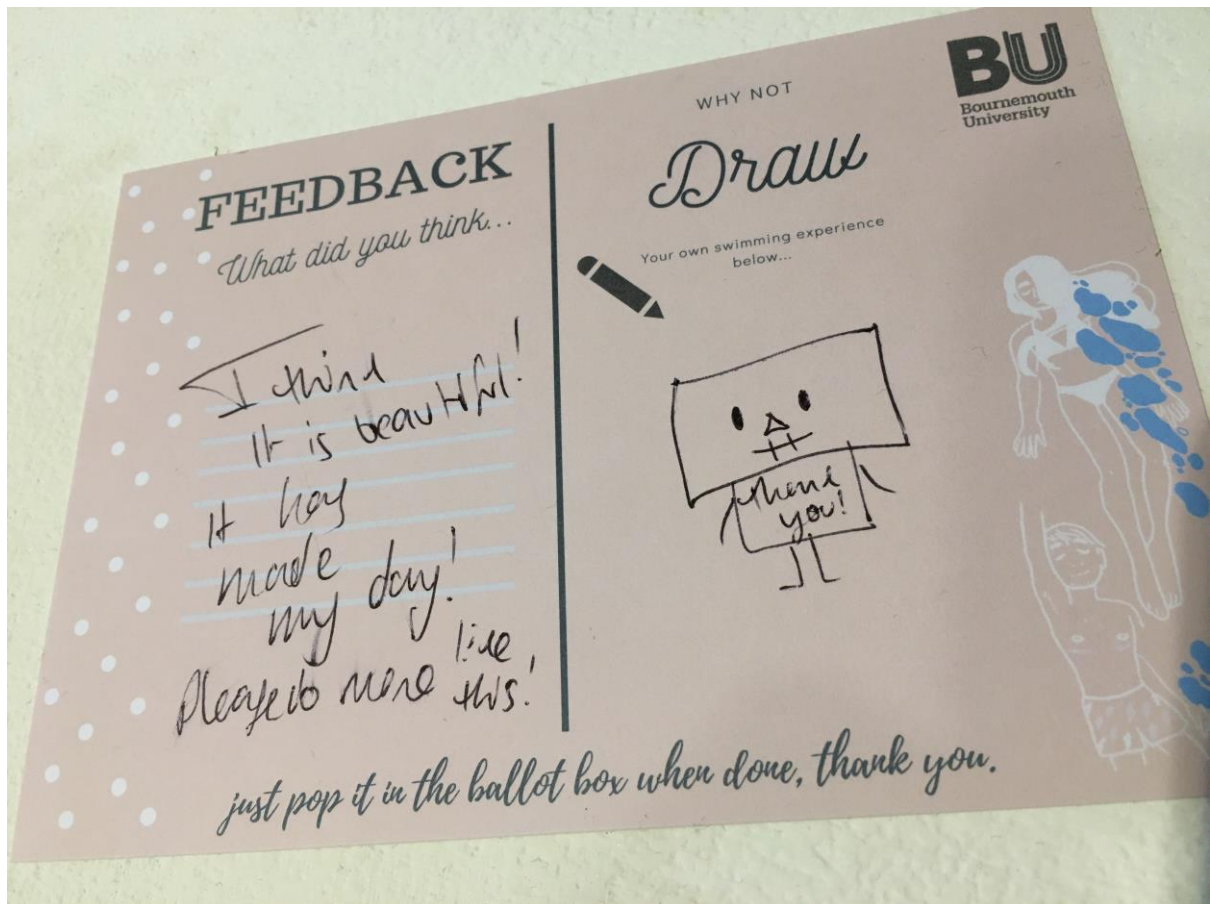




Figure 2 – Assessing impact with feedback cards

Summary

Undertaking socially just research is very much a collaborative endeavour, involving the researcher working with participants. As such it requires the researcher to carefully consider issues such as collaboration, co-production and reflexivity. Whilst there is not “set” way to successfully undertake such research, or preferred methods, there needs to be a continual acknowledgment of how the research can be undertaken *with* participants, rather than *on* them. This applies to all elements of the research process, from developing the initial aim and objectives, collecting data and analysing data, and disseminating the findings.

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