

Transformations: The Significance of Community Spaces

By Kathy Hamilton (Professor of Consumption, Markets and Society), Dr Holly Porteous (Postdoctoral Researcher and Teaching Associate) and Dr Juliette Wilson (Reader in Marketing) - University of Strathclyde :: 05/05/2022



How can researchers draw methodological inspiration from the communities they study?

We have recently come to the end of a two-year project based on a case study of [Glasgow Women's Library](#) (GWL), an organisation where creativity, art and design are embedded within organisational culture and everyday practice. Despite having very few artistic talents or crafting skills ourselves, from the beginning we saw the importance of these things to many of our research participants, and so began to consider how we could reflect this in both the project's methods and its knowledge exchange. Below, we give some background on the project, and then discuss how we drew on arts-based methods and collaborations with artists to positively disrupt conventional data collection and dissemination techniques in our disciplines.

Background

The focus of our project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, was to explore the role of community and service spaces in contributing towards positive transformative experiences for the people who use them. Our findings showed how well-being is enacted through the construction of the physical space and the continued importance of physical community spaces in the digital age. Interactions with service and community spaces have the capacity to transform the lives of those experiencing vulnerability, for example due to social, cultural and/or economic barriers they may face.

Embedding Arts & Creativity in Data Collection

The start of our journey into creative methods involved taking a moment to step back as we came to the end of the interview phase of the project, where we had spoken with over 60 people including staff, volunteers, users and networks of GWL. We wondered whether there was a way to bring the powerful stories we had heard from participants to life, and came across illustrator [Jules Scheele](#), whose previous work had featured similar themes to those we had been exploring in the project. Sharing a collection of representative quotes from the interviews with Jules, we commissioned a series of illustrations which would represent the project visually (example shown below).



At the same time, we wanted to also consider how creative, arts-based methods might enable us to collect richer data to enhance our understanding of transformative experiences at GWL. In collaboration with GWL volunteer coordinator Gabrielle Macbeth and local artist and long-term GWL collaborator Helen de Main, we organised two [risograph](#) printing workshops. Participants were encouraged to explore and

share what difference GWL had made to their lives through the creation of a postcard-sized print, allowing them to express personal experiences of transformation in colour, shapes and writing (see below). Members of the research team also participated in the workshops, which – given that none of us have experience in visual arts – was absolutely vital in gaining a deeper understanding of the benefits of creative groupwork in building a sense of community and well-being.



Using Creative Visuals in Dissemination and Knowledge Exchange

When it came to sharing our findings, the extra dimension added to our research material by the illustrations and risograph prints encouraged us to think more on how we could use visual elements in different ways.

We had already arranged a month of end-of-project events in collaboration with Glasgow Women's Library which would allow us to share findings with participants, stakeholders and the wider public. Firstly, as part of our main online event, we commissioned visual minutes/graphic recording from a specialist artist, [Jenny Capon](#), who worked on these as the event was taking place, incorporating comments from the audience as we gave presentations and paused for questions. Jenny then presented a draft version at the end of the event, helping to consolidate what we had presented and bring our findings to life (see below).



We also thought creatively around how to present our project in person at four 'meet the researcher' events. Drawing on basic principles behind visuals such as word clouds, we created a 'word tree' on which we hung butterfly shapes decorated with key words that had arisen during our research into transformation (e.g. creativity, feminism, acceptance). We also chose short quotations to be printed onto small, 3D wooden blocks. These visual elements were key in piquing the interest of passers-by, providing elements that anybody could relate to and allowed for deeper engagement with the research findings, as they acted as prompts for conversation and discussion. We also found that people shared further stories of transformation with us at the events as a result of this.

Reflections

Visual elements and artistic collaborations have enabled us to open up new theoretical understandings about the relationships between producers and consumers of transformative spaces and how community spaces feed into empowerment, inclusion and well-being. We have also developed methodological insights on alternative practices, ethics and representations. Illustrations and risographs formed part of an exhibition that was hosted at GWL throughout March 2022 to support dissemination and sharing of our research.

Overall, we hope the project findings will be of interest to a range of organisations who seek to effect positive change with local communities and beyond, such as women's organisations, local authorities, community development professionals, and those working in the arts and public engagement. For further findings and recommendations stemming from our project, please watch our short video on [Transformative Spaces](#).

About the authors

We all work in the Department of Marketing at the University of Strathclyde. Kathy Hamilton is a professor of consumption, markets and society. Holly Porteous is a post-doctoral researcher and teaching associate with a background in gender, consumption and post-Soviet studies. Juliette Wilson is a Reader in Marketing with interests in hybrid organisational structures and alternative and non-mainstream markets. We have been able to share different outlooks on methods as well as services, spaces, organisations and social inequality/vulnerability. If you'd like to know more about the project we would love to hear from you, please email Kathy Hamilton in the first instance kathy.hamilton@strath.ac.uk.

Image credit 1: *Jules Scheele*

Image credit 2: *Participant in Transformations workshop at Glasgow Women's Library*

Image credit 3: *Jenny Capon*