

Young people with muslim backgrounds exploring their multiple senses of belonging

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the performative, art-based, and participatory methods used in two major research projects conducted with immigrant youth in Finland: Since 2009, I have been engaged in the participatory performative research project “A Finn, a Foreigner, or a Transnational Hip-hopper? Participatory Art-Based Research on the Identification Negotiations and Belongings of Second-Generation Finnish Immigrant Youth”, and in 2016, I began to work as a researcher for a project called “Young Muslims and Resilience—A Participatory Study.” I also discuss the roles that participatory performative research approaches play in these projects. I begin by briefly discussing my own positionings as a researcher and by introducing the main data, materials, productions, and themes that emerged from the data. I then reflect on the methodological foundation of these projects. Finally, I discuss how young people have negotiated their belonging through multiple identifications and relations to religion by examining their performative productions and the insights that participating in these projects provided them.

Bio

Helena Oikarinen-Jabai works as a senior researcher, educator, and freelancer writer. She completed her doctoral studies in art education at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. Her research interests are interdisciplinary, and she is especially interested in how various ways of knowing and artistic practices can be applied in research settings. She has worked with children, youths, and women in many cultural settings, both in Finland and abroad. She has also completed a licentiate degree in philosophy (drama studies), as well as master's degrees in psychology (intercultural communication), cultural anthropology, and education (gender studies).

Background

Sometimes life pulls people into situations that seem to be accidental but also necessary, useful, painful, and/or joyous. Perhaps I became interested in the performative and art-based research methods because of incidents and embodied experiences that intrigued me, encouraging me to explore how social, aesthetic, and cultural environments shape people and to examine what happens to people in encounters within hybrid spaces, where various cultural realities, ways of knowing, and embodied experiences coexist, meet, and mingle.

Working with participants from multiple cultural backgrounds; researchers coming from various disciplinary backgrounds; and other producers, youths, and cultural workers, has often been challenging. Even though it has been hard to accept the sometimes characteristically contestable, messy, and slow research process, the performative approaches and the research settings have allowed space for manifold conflicting opinions, dead ends found on the research path, savouring the nuances of expressions of diverse participants, and has supported reflecting on one's own ideas in relation to those of others (Barone, 2006, Ballangee-Morris, & Stuhr, 2001; Behar, 2008; Finley, 2005, Jungnickel & Hjort, 2014, Oikarinen-Jabai, 2011; St. Pierre, 2005).

My present study concerning the resilience of young women with Muslim backgrounds is based on a previous study *A Finn, a Foreigner, or a Transnational Hip-hopper?* that concentrated on the sense of belonging among young people with immigrant backgrounds (Oikarinen-Jabai, 2015; 2018, in press). In the former project, the participants created productions such as exhibitions, books, and video documentaries as fellow researchers—together with myself (the principal researcher) and the artists, art educators, and cultural and media workers associated with the project.

During the previous project, it became obvious that the participants who had Muslim backgrounds had particular needs to speak for themselves and to share their ideas in the public productions that they created during the research process. The young Finnish-Somalis in particular felt that they had been exposed to stereotypical representations, derogatory images, prejudices, and racism (cf. Open Society Foundations, 2013). This may be one reason why a group of participants (five male and one female) with Somali backgrounds

wanted to continue the co-operation for several years by producing various kinds of art and media works (Oikarinen-Jabai, 2015).

In the ongoing project, I work mainly with five young women from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. They all find it important to talk from their personal perspectives and to broaden the images and representations of Muslim women in Finland and around the world. In their artworks, they found it important to talk about and present new ways to approach religion.

Data and Projects

In the previous project, along with the group of young Somali men, I worked mainly with Sami Sallinen, a photographer, and Joel Gräfning, an art educator. As workshop leaders, these colleagues and I were more like facilitators who were around when needed to provide support for the participants. In the beginning of the project, there were also other people participating, but the core group involved five young men. They created audio narratives and videos and photographed their everyday lives.

My Helsinki, the first exhibition resulting from this project, was presented in January 2011 at the Music Library in Helsinki; again at Stoa Cultural Center, Helsinki (2012) and at the Institute of Migration in Turku, in *By My Eyes* exhibition (2013) that included photographs and an installation by a young Somali woman. Based on her photographs and video installation, I also collaborated with her to create a book *Through Other Eyes* (Yusuf, 2015). Modified versions of the art works done by the participant were presented also in other exhibitions.¹

In 2012, with the young participating men and I created a book called *My Town* (2012); a video documentary called *Minun Helsinkini/My Helsinki/Magaaladeydii Helsinki* was first time presented in 2010, and modified as a DVD version in 2013 (Farah et al., 2013). A radio programme (*Where Is My*

1 For example, in the April 2012 as part of Young Helsinki exhibition at the Finnish Museum of Photography that I organized in April 2012 as part of my research project, together with several artists, art educators and museum workers. The workshops in which the material for the exhibition was created were held in schools and Youth Centres in various districts of Helsinki, with participants of multiple national, ethnic and language backgrounds. Also, some art works were included in the Arooska - Somali Marriage exhibition in Helinä Rautavaara Museum, Espoo (2013), African Presence in Finland exhibition in Labour Museum Werstas, Tampere (2015) and some other exhibitions.

Space?; Farah & al., 2011)² premiered in 2011, and a TV programme (*Soo Dhawoow - Come Closer*; Farah et al., 2016) in 2016.

In my ongoing research with young women with Muslim background, the participants started their research in 2016 by taking photographs related to important and empowering issues (Figure 1). The research team³ also video-taped sequences of places and practices that the young co-researchers found empowering. After having conversations concerning the ideas and images that this visual material awoke in the participants' minds, they continued planning their artworks.

My colleagues and I organized an exhibition *Numur – Islam and I* at Helsinki's Stoa Cultural Centre in November 2017.⁴ The key themes that these young women dealt with included living in between cultures, borderlands, Sufism, motherhood, and gender and sexuality in the context of Islam. Also, the young male research participants presented their works.⁵



Figure 1. Photo Sara Salmani (2016), "My prayer mat."

2 Also a female participant took part in the radio programme

3 This included participants, my research assistant Wisam Elfadl, and I.

4 The exhibition was funded by Kone Foundation, Arts Promotion Center Finland and Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council

5 The male participants of the ongoing research mainly worked with my colleague Henri Onodera. Also some other young women with whom I had worked earlier or who wanted to present their art works in this context participated in the exhibition.

Methodology



Figure 2. Photo Najma Yusuf (2015), from the book *Through Other Eyes*.

This is one of my favourite pictures. In the photo, hands from people from all continents are represented. The importance of interaction is foregrounded. Even if people have different opinions, it should not prevent them from creating things together. Everyone has the freedom to express their own opinions and ways of thinking, but it is important to be able to communicate with people who have different ideas. Perhaps they can offer a perspective that you have never imagined. (Yusuf, 2015, p. 5)

In both of the major projects, the performative approach was a central methodological tool. Performativity is a widely used concept in academic research fields, but it is impossible to explore its roots in this short article. Nevertheless, it is obvious that, since the 19th century, people from disenfranchised groups have seen performances and performativity as means of making their voices heard (Conquergood, 2009; Oikarinen-Jabai, 2008). As Dwight Conquergood (2009) noted, the dominant ways of knowing in academia—“knowing that” and “knowing about,” which are based on the Enlightenment view of modernity—have often left those who are considered “others” outside or led to their objectification by those who are considered to be part of the “us” group. By leaning instead on propositional knowledge (“knowing how” and “knowing who”)—which is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connections—performative research enables participants to be active cultural citizens and to participate in negotiations on the transformation of cultural practices (Conquergood, 2009; Oikarinen-Jabai, 2015).

Maggie O’Neill (2008) stated that performative, participatory projects are especially useful when exploring transnational and diasporic experiences, as they allow people to play in the potential in-between spaces. Based on my research experience, I have found that the spaces created within these projects are very important to young people. Many of the participants in the projects discussed in this paper felt that they had been unable to share some of their experiences with friends from different backgrounds or within their school environment. The participatory research setting offered them a space to openly discuss and negotiate their embodied knowledge as well as their questions connected to belonging, home, identification, religion, and citizenship. These young people also felt that, within these projects, they were able to talk back and to create multiple heterogeneous images and narrations of Finns and Finnishness (Oikarinen-Jabai, 2015; O’Neill, 2011).

To jointly create space for the participants’ perspectives and voices, I placed my trust in unfinished knowledge, an approach that Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) highlighted. By following this approach, I accepted the participants’ various voices and positions, as well as the knowledge that those various positions can produce. The intersectionality involved in understanding knowledge as a process helped me and all the participants to become receptive to the positions and paths that emerged during the research process (Brah, 2011; Lloyd, 2005). Furthermore, in public productions, audiences are also participants and negotiators in the process of exploring meanings and expressions.

The long and vibrant research process was beneficial, as the length and the opportunity for retrospective reflection made it possible to interpret each production as either an argument or a response. For example, in the previous project the young Somali men wanted to make a new TV programme, thus continuing and extending the discussion and presentations that they created in their first video programme. This was done partly as a response to the external feedback they received and partly because of their own reactions to their earlier performances (Oikarinen-Jabai, 2018, forthcoming).

Trinh Minh-ha (1991) noted that disrupting the existing system of dominant values and challenging the foundation of a social and cultural order means not merely destroying a few prejudices or reversing power relations; rather, it is important to perceive “the revolving door of all rationalizations and to meet head on the truth of that struggle between fictions” (p. 6.) Therefore, it is also important that all participants in participatory performative projects trust

the intervals where “knowledge acquired remains suspended in non-knowingness” (Minh-ha, 2011, p. 94). This may create the space and possibilities for a virtuality of subjectivities and play in the potential in-between horizon, where home can be an imaginary space that unites the past, present, and future (Ahmed, 2000; Ashcroft, 2001; O’Neill, 2008; Schechner, 1995).

Being In Between

When participants created material and staged productions, they travelled through their past, present, and future, opening up manifold imagery (cf. Minh-ha, 2011). During the process of staging productions, the questions about belonging, identification, and identity appeared to be rhizomatic and controversial. By negotiating and creating new paths, the young people were able to find multiple perspectives to deal with belonging and identification. They also empowered their marginalized identities, creating diasporic “minoritarian identities” in the process (Butler, 2000; Sheikh, 2001).

For example, a favourite of the participants was a photo taken in Suomenlinna (Figure 3), which is an island with a military history that is today a tourist attraction. In the photo, a young Somali man seems to have appeared from behind a sand dune. Many people who saw this picture at the *My Helsinki* exhibition (or on the exhibition’s poster) thought that the photo had been shot in Somalia or somewhere in Africa, as if an ancestral shadow were following the young man, connecting him with representations of Africa and Africans. The picture on his T-shirt refers to other kinds of images of young black men. “Thug Life”⁶ is the U.S citizen rapper Tupac Shakur’s slogan for the resilience of black people. It is the opposite of having all you need to succeed; it refers to when you have nothing but still succeed—when you have overcome many obstacles to reach your goal. To the young men, these kinds of images and representations of Blackness and Africanness, which lean on African American resistance media, were at least as familiar as the images connected with rising from behind sand dunes (Oikarinen-Jabai, in press 2018; Sawyer, 2000).

6 Tubac Shakur has said Thug Life also being an abbreviation from the words: The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody.



Figure 3. Photo Helena Oikarinen-Jabai (2010), "Suomenlinna, Finland".

Many participants' bodies seemed to be in between various forces, representations, and possibilities, based on history and on their embodied experiences (cf. Ahmed, 2000). The surrounding images and ideas caused them to feel concerned about their cultural backgrounds and the difference written on their skin; these images constantly reminded them to try to see themselves from the perspective of a third party (Fanon, 1986, p. 112). Despite this, they saw Helsinki as a "beloved home," where they "have been to every backyard and peeped under every stone" (Kahie et al., 2012, p. 15). In their productions, the participants often used multiple positionings and challenged both othering and the polarizing notions and images of their belonging; in this way, they transformed and empowered those images (Friedman, 2002; Oikarinen-Jabai, in press 2018).

National borders, skin colour, and religion did not define the participants' home country or their feelings about home. In the book *Through Other Eyes* (Yusuf, 2015), a young woman explained:

My home country is always Somalia, but home is where my family and memories are, which is Finland. Home and home country are different things in my opinion, and I see myself first as a Somali and then—not necessarily quite as a Finn—but as a person from the country of Finland. Above all, I see myself as an international Somali. (p. 7)

In the previous project, the female participants (more than the males) dealt with questions connected to religion and their identification as Muslims (Oikarinen-Jabai, in press, 2018). In the current project, being Muslim was a starting point. Most of the female participants still experienced religious identity as one of their many intersecting identifications, and everyone approached it differently.⁷ For example, one female participant (to whom the Sufi movement was important) created an installation called *Sufi Masa* that depicts a rotating dervish dancer (Figure 4). Another participant explored, through her photographs and poems, a queer perspective in an Islamic context. One young woman commented, in her installation, “Inside/Outside the Box,” on her inside- or outside-ness in the Finnish cultural landscape.

During the process of making the exhibition *Numur - I and Islam*, it became obvious that there were as many ways of interpreting religion as there were participants. The Muslim audience also had various ways of encountering the artworks and the ideas behind them. I was surprised to notice the strong dividing lines that were adopted and the diversity of the discourses in the Finnish Muslim community. The research and the exhibition setting opened some spaces to share and negotiate those discourses.

7 For example, in the context of the exhibition, some participants wanted the exhibition poster to refer to people with Muslim backgrounds, rather than to Muslims per se.



Figure 4. Installation "Sufi Masa", Zala Shbib (2017).

Conclusion

The process of staging exhibitions and creating audio-visual works and books – by supporting participants deal with and perform their embodied experiences and belonging – helped all the participants to question and deconstruct the othering ethnic, racial, and religious categorizations and images. Many of the participating young people had been used to dealing with these issues since childhood, but the productions and the process of expressing their ideas and feelings opened up a space for them to delve deeper into their experiences, to discuss and share their knowledge with various audiences, and to start a dialogue.

This project's performative research approach created trust in the unfinished processes and not knowing, of listening, and of touching. Exploring the research questions and reporting the findings together with the participants allowed for the emergence of new perspectives for understanding visual and social aesthetic values and language. Furthermore, the performative methodology enabled the disruption of academic vernaculars and ways of understanding and expressing knowledge, making it possible to sense a fresh breeze blowing towards the future.

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