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# The pleasure principle: employing arts-based methods in social work research

Victoria Foster

*This article considers how the arts can be used in research with service users as a critical praxis that fits with the ethos of social work research. It discusses a research project that took place at a Sure Start programme in North West England, UK. Sure Start is a government initiative working with families with pre-school-age children in the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas of the country. The project recruited local, working-class mothers to carry out research into the effectiveness of the programme and into their contemporaries' experiences of parenting, often in poverty. It employed drama as a means of communicating the research findings, involving local mothers in constructing and performing two plays. One play took the form of an 'ethnodrama', whilst the other was influenced by pantomime. The paper looks at the context for applying this methodology and discusses the process of doing so. It then moves on to consider the success of the project, looking at various means of assessing the quality of arts-based research, which include the pleasure and enjoyment it brings. It concludes with the voices of some of the participants and their reflections on the process.*

*Keywords: Arts-based Research; Service User Involvement; Ethnodrama; Pantomime; Working-class Mothers*

## Introduction

This article has been developed from a presentation given at the European Conference of Social Work Research 2011. It looks at the current vogue for arts-based research and at how such 'alternative' methodologies can fit with critical social work research practice. Social work research—and social research more broadly—overwhelmingly focuses on the most vulnerable groups in society, which means that there will inevitably be issues of unequal power relations between researcher and researched. Lynch (2000) describes how this can add further to oppression:

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> there are now people who can claim to know and understand you better than you understand yourself; there are experts there to interpret your world and to speak on your behalf. They take away your voice by speaking for you and about you. (p. 80)

Social work research needs to challenge social injustices, particularly in terms of revealing structural oppression, rather than add to them or even to maintain the status quo. Indeed, the British code of social work emphasises the necessity to 'challenge ways in which the policies or activities of government, organisations or society create or contribute to structural disadvantage, hardship and suffering or militate against their relief' (British Association of Social Workers, 2002, Section 3.2.2.a.). However, Bisman (2004, p. 119) voices her concerns that there has been too much emphasis on the development of scientific knowledge and technical expertise within social work at the expense of its core values.

There was much debate throughout the conference about what social work research should look like. Notably, Smith (2011) grappled with his vision of this, concluding that whilst there are inevitably different models under the umbrella of social work research, they should all share the following characteristics:

(1) Concern with social problems
(2) Action-oriented ('lived reality')
(3) Interstitial (at the interface of the individual and the social, and of structure and process)
(4) Holistic
(5) Eclectic (and proud)
(6) User-focused
(7) Value-based

Here, I argue that arts-based approaches can be applied to achieve such a vision. In particular, I focus on the opportunity they offer to address power relations in the research process, not least by reducing the focus on the written word and looking at other means of communication. Furthermore, they allow participants to engage their imaginations and creativity; they facilitate empathy and challenge misconceptions by giving insight to their audience into aspects of their lives, revealing what their lives are like and the potential for how they could be:

> [Those who deal with art] are also trained to imagine alternatives to the actual. Art encourages you to fantasize and desire. (Eagleton, 2004, p. 40)

This article centres on an ESRC-funded, two-year research project that was carried out at a Sure Start programme in the UK.[1] Sure Start is a government initiative introduced over a decade ago by New Labour, which has seen its funding cut substantially since the new Conservative-led coalition party came to power in 2010. It works in the most disadvantaged areas of the country with families that have pre-school-age children, and has historically provided a wide and varied range of learning

activities for children and parents; at its height there were several hundred local programmes spread across the UK, each varying with regard to the services and activities on offer. The research presented here took place at one of the first Sure Start programmes to be set up in the country, in a particularly socially and economically deprived ex-mining town in North West England. This programme received its funding through the local Primary Care Trust and thus there was significant emphasis on improving the health and well-being of young children and their families, as well as on developing parenting skills.

The research utilised a range of arts-based methods in undertaking an evaluation of the Sure Start programme (including video, visual art and poetry), as means of collecting data as well as disseminating the findings. This article focuses on two plays based on the research data that were produced and performed by local mothers of children attending the Sure Start programme in order to re-tell the stories told to us during the course of the research. Whereas the other methods were more focused on producing data, the drama was more concerned with the analysis and dissemination stages of the research process. Participatory approaches to research often focus on involving participants in data collection, so the drama provided a means of extending the participatory process to the later but equally important phases of a research project. One of the plays produced was a realistic 'ethnodrama', scripted verbatim from interview transcripts; the other was a much more flamboyant piece, influenced by the British tradition of pantomime. This article examines the research process, in particular the collaborative element that such an approach necessitates. Eisner (2008) pictures the future of qualitative research using such methods:

> The vision I am describing is considerably more collaborative, cooperative, multidisciplinary, and multimodal in character. Knowledge creation is a social affair. The solo producer will no longer be salient. (p. 10)

This article acknowledges the difficulty of assessing the success or otherwise of arts-based research. As Leavy points out, new artistic methods require new flexible methods of assessment or at least adaptation of more conventional approaches. Because of this, artistic forms of social inquiry have the potential to 'move conversations about knowledge construction forward' (Leavy, 2009, p. 16). It is argued that this is a necessary aim if we are to produce research that contributes to an amelioration of social conditions and furthers social justice. This article concludes with the reflections of some of the women involved three years on from the original project.[2]

## Arts-Based Research

Over the past two decades, arts-based methods have continued to gain greater currency in social research, despite a simultaneous rise in the popularity of evidence-based practice (see Webb, 2001) and increasing emphasis on scientific research. There are myriad ways of employing the arts to further our knowledge of the world in

which we live. These include narrative writing (Lentin, 2000), auto/ethnography (Kolker, 1996), performance (Mienczakowski *et al.*, 2002), short film (Foster, 2009), poetry (Stzo *et al.*, 2005), dance (Snowber, 2002), music (Daykin, 2008), sculpture, collage and painting (Van Son, 2000).

These alternative forms of social inquiry are counter to the positivism that is regaining currency through evidence-based practice. This latter epistemology can be seen as a perspective that has 'historically concealed multiple meanings by proposing universal truths that have oppressed and silenced many groups, often rendering them invisible within knowledge production' (Leavy, 2009, p. 15). Such traditional forms of social inquiry do, however, produce familiar, 'robust' data that can be subjected to reassuring tests of objectivity, reliability and validity:

> We prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. Knowledge as a process, a temporary state, is scary to many. (Eisner, 1997 cited in Leavy, 2009, p. 9)

Arts-based methods produce a less tangible knowledge and are more suited to some types of research than others. They are more useful for exploring the nuances of lived experiences and promoting dialogue than for providing direct answers to questions. Since 'the primary focus of a profession like social work is not defining and explaining . . . but caring and changing' (Bisman, 2004, p. 115), then they should prove particularly apt in this field. Whilst much alternative inquiry is rooted in a perceived necessity for political change, not all arts-based research is particularly concerned with social justice. However, its methodologies and methods have the potential to be used in this way. For instance, Van Son (2000, p. 217) observes how, over time, visual sociology has moved 'from a focus on the specific, which hid and muted the critiques of the system, to exposing social problems and injustices by inclusion of context and research subject "in the picture"'.

### *Background to the Sure Start Research*

I spent over a year at the Sure Start programme in the role of community artist before embarking on the research. I was involved in running a weekly group for the parents and carers of children attending the programme, which provided a range of art and craft activities and visits to art galleries. Like a significant number of the participants in the group, I was a lone mother of a young child at this time. This aided my acceptance into the local community and the art group was well attended. Whilst its participants (all mothers and grandmothers of young children) engaged with the activities on offer, there was also much chatter and gossip within the group which gave me considerable insight into the women's lives and how the Sure Start initiative and its staff were viewed. This undoubtedly informed the design of the research.

My observations during this time very much reflected those expressed in the more critical literature on Sure Start and 'Third Way'[3] ideology regarding parenting. The Sure Start programme was exciting in that it provided a wealth of activities for

mothers and children in an area where there was formerly nothing of this ilk, and this is acknowledged in much of the literature. However, many of these activities centred on 'improving' parents' ability to parent (and also on improving their prospects to re-enter paid employment). This can be considered to be problematic since it assumes a deficit in poor working-class parents and supposes that this can be corrected through parenting classes and the like (see Clarke, 2006). Of course, as Featherstone (2006, p. 299) elucidates, the use of the term 'parent' obscures the fact that it is overwhelmingly mothers that such interventions are aimed at. If gender remains invisible in the rhetoric, Gewirtz (2001, p. 366) also points out that the language of class is not employed in such a strategy, the preferred terminology being 'families in challenging circumstances' or families who are 'socially excluded'. However, she sees the agenda as very much targeting a 'particular fraction' of working-class parents with the aim of transforming them into middle-class ones, attempting to universalise the latter's values, attitudes and behaviour (Gewirtz, 2001, p. 366).

These tensions manifested themselves within the programme where the research took place, namely through relationships between parents and staff. The latter often appeared critical of the former, particularly with regard to their parenting skills and lifestyle choices. Thus the ideology of the initiative, with its pathologising of poor working-class motherhood, could be seen as being transmitted on a local level. On one occasion, my son's first day at school, I was discussing with a member of Sure Start's staff about how emotional I felt. She agreed that she had had similar feelings when her children started school, unlike the local (poor working-class) mothers, she said, who could not wait to be rid of their charges: 'They're not like us real mums, are they?'

## Applying an Arts-Based Methodology

In order that the Sure Start research challenge such hegemonic assumptions that poor working-class mothers are somehow 'other' and different from their middle-class counterparts, it was fitting that it should be carried out by local women. Much has been written about participatory research and user involvement in research and, although not the focus of this article, these approaches remain critical in influencing the project (see e.g. Reason, 1994, Nolan *et al.*, 2007). The project is also a feminist one and again, the ethos of employing arts-based methods chimes with such an epistemology: feminists are 'committed to ways of knowing that avoid subordination' (Humphries, 2000, p. 181), and share the belief of other emancipatory theorists that all research is 'value-laden and inevitably political as it represents interests of a particular (usually powerful, white male) group' (Humphries, 2000, p. 181).

I recruited and trained a team of six women (all mothers of children attending the Sure Start programme) as co-researchers to enable them to undertake research with me into the effectiveness of the Sure Start programme and into local women's experiences of motherhood. I recruited the women via a range of methods, including

through producing and displaying posters and information leaflets. I also held a 'research day' where I provided a lunch and information about the project. However, the most effective means of recruitment proved to be through me visiting each of the groups that Sue Start provided and speaking directly to parents and carers. The only inclusion criteria were that participants should live in the local area and be the parent or carer of a child attending the Sure Start programme.

Once participants had received training in research methods through a series of workshops that I provided, we worked together on designing research questions. We employed a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews as methods to ask them, with participants being involved in conducting both the survey and the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded. I transcribed the interview data, circulated the transcripts to each member of the research team and we met regularly to discuss emergent themes. At the same time that we were beginning this data collection, we worked with local practitioners to set up a range of arts-based classes: poetry, film-making and visual art for local parents to attend (see Foster, 2007, 2009). Through these various media we were able to collect rich data on participants' experiences, which gave an added dimension to the findings from the more conventional methods. We analysed the findings as a group, drawing out those themes that were most prevalent as well as those which resonated with our own collective experiences. We went on to employ drama as a means of disseminating them, as discussed in further detail below, because we agreed that it fitted with Saldaña's (1999, p. 61) criteria in terms of being the 'best' way to represent this data, 'validly, vividly and persuasively' for our audience.

Arts-based methods were an ideal fit with the culture of the Sure Start community. Had there not already been a strong engagement with the arts (through the art group and, prior to this, a successful poetry group), then it might well have proved more difficult to work in this way. We worked closely with local artists and practitioners who without exception proved helpful and accommodating, despite the fact that a number of the women involved in the research could be challenging and intimidating at times. Leavy (2009, p. 18) points out the advantages of working collaboratively with practitioners, in this case outside of the university. This can 'maximize the aesthetic qualities and authenticity of the work' which, in turn, will increase the likelihood of it reaching its audience in the intended ways.

It was also fitting to use arts-based methods as means of both creating and disseminating knowledge because of the particularly low literacy levels in the community. Employing modes of inquiry that did not privilege the written word were successful in engaging 'hard-to-reach' groups in telling their stories (video proved particularly useful here, see Foster, 2009). We also wanted as many local people as possible to be able to access the research findings. As part of the agreement with the Sure Start programme, I produced a lengthy written report detailing the work, but we were very aware that this would only be read by a very few people. Conquergood is also concerned with the privileging of written texts above other methods of communication—what he terms 'textocentricism' (2002, p. 151)—and

stresses the importance of respecting the fact that reading and writing are not everybody's primary means of communication.

Instead we drew from the ancient, oral practice of storytelling, which far predates the scientific world of traditional social inquiry (see Warner, 1995). Traditionally the preserve of women (Warner, 1995, p. 12), it is a means of communicating to an audience via skills that are learnt through social and familial interactions rather than through the education system. Using drama to tell the stories that were told to us during the course of the research opened up the possibility of engaging a much wider and more diverse audience, not only in an entertaining way but also on a deeper level. It is this element of arts-based methods, their ability to 'generate a kind of empathy that makes action possible' (Eisner, 2008, p. 11), which provides them with the potential to effect change:

> [Performance texts] turn tales of suffering, loss, pain, and victory into evocative performances that have the ability to move audiences to reflective, critical action, and not just emotional catharsis. (Denzin, 1997, p. 95)

## The Plays

The drama group was set up at the beginning of the two-year project and over this time period engaged a significant number of local families: children, parents and grandparents. Again, the inclusion criteria were that participants should live in the local area and be the parents or carers of children attending the Sure Start programme. We also encouraged children of all ages to attend and the group took place after school to facilitate this. Numbers increased over time until at its height the group had around 25 members. Before we began to work on scripting the research findings into plays, we wrote, rehearsed and performed a pantomime (see Foster forthcoming). Pantomime is a traditional British form of entertainment that remains extremely popular around the Christmas period. In its contemporary form, it dates back to late Victorian times, but as Taylor (2007, p. 12) explains, pantomime is 'a living form with a largely oral tradition and so is always in a state of flux'. It involves a somewhat farcical re-telling of a fairy tale where the hero is involved in a quest or journey. Its cast of stock characters also includes a villain, a princess, a dame (played by a man dressed as a woman) and a principal boy (played by a woman dressed as a man). The pantomime at Sure Start, 'Hansel and Gretel', was driven by requests from the families involved in the drama group. They were all familiar with this genre of theatre; in fact, in most cases it was the only form of theatre they were familiar with. It proved to be a successful way of engaging participants who all learned new skills and built their confidence (as I did myself; I was cast as the principal boy). We collaborated with a local amateur dramatist, Diane, who remained enthusiastic throughout the lengthy process of scripting, rehearsing and staging the pantomime, and it was an enjoyable experience for both the cast and audience. One mother, who had reluctantly brought her sons to watch the performance, worried that they would

be disruptive, was surprised to find that they were spellbound by the show: 'The boys sat there [throughout the performance] and they never moved'.

We then moved on to work with the interview data which, by this time, the co-researchers and I had organised through thematic analysis. The scriptwriting process can also be understood as a form of data analysis, since it involves careful thinking about which stories need to be told, and how best to represent them. Saldaña (1999, p. 61), similarly, found that his construction of an ethnographic performance text 'began not as an artistic vision, but as a data analytic process'. Working collaboratively—with Diane, having expertise in this area, taking the lead—we produced two short plays, *The Bus Stop* and *The Wizard of Us*. As a version of an 'ethnodrama' (Mienczakowski, 2000; Mienczakowski *et al.*, 2002), *The Bus Stop* was comprised of interview data which was employed verbatim. Thus, for the most part, the words of this short, two-act play come straight from the mouths of local parents and carers and reflect a range of attitudes towards the Sure Start programme.

In the first act, three women meet at a bus stop; one talks about her involvement with Sure Start, encouraging the second woman to attend. They discuss their experiences of isolation and post-natal depression and of the highs and lows of motherhood. The third woman voices her suspicions of Sure Start, seeing it as having a link with social services and its staff being 'interfering'. In the second act, some time later, the women once again meet at the bus stop. The two women both now involved with the programme talk about how it has impacted upon their lives as well as their children's, and how it has affected familial relationships (both positively and negatively). The third woman remains sceptical.

The second play was a response to families' requests to perform another pantomime after the success of the initial one. Through lots of group discussion we decided to re-tell and perform local mothers' stories through the well-known characters from Frank L Baum's *Wizard of Oz* (we subtly changed the title of the original tale). Dorothy is a young mother from the local area who, like many of the women we interviewed, had experienced postnatal depression and was generally dissatisfied with her life; she wanted something better for her little girl, Toto. In setting off on her quest to find this she happens upon Scarecrow, Lion and Tinman. She meets Scarecrow in Drugs City; Scarecrow has always been told, by her parents and by her teachers, that she is stupid and will never amount to anything and has sought comfort in her drug use. The two women become friends and find themselves in Armchair City where they meet Lion. Lion is shy and lacking in confidence and spends her days shut inside her house watching daytime television. Dorothy and Scarecrow befriend her and the three travellers go on to meet Tinman in Dole City. Tinman has given up his job in a factory to look after his son, but now that his son has started school he would like to return to work. However, Tinman does not have the qualifications that are now required. He joins the others on their quest to find a better life for themselves and their children. Dorothy, with a little help from her good conscience, sees the signpost marked 'home'. Realising that there are people there that can support their quest, the travellers come to understand that 'there's no place like home'.

The drama allowed us to stay true to social work's values and mission:

> At the heart of arts-based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge. (Finley, 2008, p. 72)

Through these characters we were able to represent aspects of the women who had taken part in the research and to relay some of their most commonly shared experiences in a way that felt appropriate to them. Despite the outlandish costumes we donned, there remained a realistic edge to the work through the close adherence to the interview data and to the use of local dialogue. The plays were performed to a sizeable audience of local families, Sure Start staff, local professionals, councillors and academics at the end of the two-year project. The response, as discussed later in the article, was a very emotional one, which we captured by asking audience members to record their thoughts and reactions on postcards provided.

## Validity

Evaluating the knowledge that is constructed through arts-based methods requires different approaches from those positivistic concepts of validity and reliability. Alternative means might veer towards 'resonance, understanding, multiple meanings, dimensionality, and collaboration' (Leavy, 2009, p. 16). Clough (2000, p. 278) is concerned that the growth in use of alternative, arts-based methods (she is specifically discussing experimental writing) and the recent trend for setting criteria with which to 'judge' their efficacy might mean that the roots of such experimental forms of research, in particular their link with political contentions, are lost. Such concern has significant resonance for social work research. Bisman (2004, p. 115) asks: 'Without values and morality, what good is the knowledge attained and skills used by social workers?' In a similar vein, Reason (2000) notes that in terms of quality 'there are two questions you can ask of your work: what joy does it bring to others? And what injustice and suffering does it address?' (p. 17). As for the research process, '[i]f human inquiry is not exciting, life enhancing, even pleasurable, then what is it worth?' (Reason, 2000, p. 6). Taking an alternative approach to assessing the worth of arts-based research impels us to reflect on what we are trying to achieve through our research and think creatively about how best to measure its impact. 'The question shifts from "Is this good arts-based research?" to "What is this arts-based research good for?"' (Leggo, 2008 cited in Leavy, 2009, pp. 17; emphasis in the original).

Using such evaluative criteria as 'pleasure' produced through the process is so very different from traditional methods of judging research outcomes and provides a drastic shift in focus. It also acts as a reminder that knowledge construction is not the politically neutral, straightforward process presented by positivism. The knowledge that is produced through the experiences of those who are 'simultaneously researchers and researched' is particular and specific knowledge, 'knowledge from somewhere' (Dockery, 2000, p. 97). This again challenges 'the conventional idea of

pure knowledge which is uncontaminated by the conditions of its collection' (Dockery, 2000, p. 97). When it comes to reproducing this knowledge in any research accounts, not just those influenced by the arts, it is important to acknowledge that these accounts, 'far from being simple, neutral or transparent reflections of the research process, are in fact, complex, rhetorical accomplishments' (Gill, 1998, p. 21). Denzin (2000, p. 261) would agree that 'nothing ever tells itself, nothing stands outside representation'. This is particularly emphasised in terms of arts-based research:

> The poetic, performative text translates remembered and observed experience into narrative truth. This is a remaking that takes liberties with the so-called facts in the situation, understanding that facts are only a form of representation. (Denzin, 2000, p. 261)

Edmondson (2000, p. 196) believes that, whilst knowledge about society is partial and incomplete, this does not undermine the need to distinguish between truth and falsity. Truth in this case remains a 'guiding value' rather than the result of objective, bias-free research. Willis (2008, p. 54) suggests that 'versimilitude' is the key to assessing the quality of these types of research. This he describes as a '"phenomenological aha" – the moment of "that's it"; "yes that is what it's really like"'. Similarly, Josselson and Lieblich (1993, p. xii) describe good narrative analysis as 'making sense' in intuitive, holistic ways. The 'knowing' in such work includes but transcends the rational.

Whilst producing the plays at the Sure Start programme, we spoke repeatedly about the script 'feeling' right and 'true', either of our experiences or those of people we knew. At the first rehearsal of *The Bus Stop*, the actors and those watching agreed that it could very much be a conversation that they themselves had had. This collaborative way of working helped to achieve a certain authenticity and much of the audience feedback commented on the work being 'real' and 'true'. One local mother told us: 'The girls' stories made tears come to my eyes . . .. But all they said and did was the truth about [the local area]'. This 'truth' can be understood more as a sense of the storytelling resonating with audience members' own experiences and observations rather than as an objective, measurable concept. Bhattacharyya (1998, p. 9) is referring here to the telling and re-telling of the *Arabian Nights*:

> As the big theorists say, the concept of reiterability has a special status in Western cultures: this is what makes truth, the ability to repeat and check. The error-filled and corrupt pleasures of the *Nights*, on the other hand, in any inauthentic version from orientalist translation to half-remembered half-embellished bedtime story, offer another way of telling the story and making sense of the world. (p. 9)

Since it was also an aim of our research that we should challenge 'outsiders' opinions and understandings of the local working-class mothers, it was reassuring to receive feedback from a variety of professionals and members of Sure Start staff that

suggested they had been shown a different view of service users' lives. One health professional notes:

> Excellent to see all the talents and strengths of people in the community, who often I see during my work hours, to see another side to their lives was fantastic.

Many of the responses referred to emotional reactions to the performance. A member of Sure Start's staff reports:

> I found the presentation today very moving [can't believe I couldn't stop crying!]

The research certainly appeared to succeed in terms of encouraging empathy with the local mothers and the character of their experience that is, says Eisner (2008, p. 11), 'the first avenue to compassion'. What it omitted to do, however, was to take advantage of the opportunity to create a space for dialogue with the audience, which Leavy (2009, p. 18) believes is 'vital to the negotiation of meanings and incorporation of multiple perspectives'. On reflection, asking for brief, written responses to the plays, although it did provide some useful data which added a dimension of validity to the work, was not the ideal method to use within an approach to research that sought alternatives to the written word. Had we built in a critical discussion following the performance, this might have strengthened the ability of the research to confront stereotypes and challenge people's ways of thinking and working.

## Conclusion

The process of carrying out arts-based research at the Sure Start programme and engaging local mothers in telling and performing stories about themselves was an enjoyable and rewarding one. It involved a large amount of time and resources (this is a criticism of research involving service users per se; see Hodgson & Canvin, 2005), but those involved reported such positive benefits as improved confidence and new, exciting skills for themselves and their children. The audience reaction was overwhelmingly positive and the co-researchers and I went on to disseminate the work (showing film footage of the plays) at a number of academic conferences where it was equally well-received. Yet, it did not promote the change at an organisational level that we had hoped for, which proved to be a failing of the research. This was particularly apparent when I re-visited the same Sure Start community three years on and spoke to five of the local women who had been involved in the research to look at what, if any, lasting changes had taken place.

It was evident that a divide still existed between staff and parents and in fact that this divide had actually increased. This was partly due to the change of management that had taken place part-way through the initial research project. The new manager, a health professional, was less receptive to arts-based research than her predecessor. One of the co-researchers recalls our research being referred to as 'a special kind of information', which, she says, 'really got my back up!' She continues: 'it was like, "well

it's a special kind of information that can't be proven anyway so I don't know why you're bothering'". This highlights a real flaw in the use of arts-based research: the lack of scientific 'weight' behind it can be used to reject the findings if they do not fit with what the recipients of research want to hear. This then negates the possibility for change on a larger scale unless those with the power to effect change for social justice are willing to do so. On an individual level, though, the use of arts-based methods proved much more effective. Another of the women involved in data collection and the drama reflects on the response to the performance:

> Cos I wouldn't have expected – well I didn't expect – you know like for't have people being touched by it, moved by it, and you know being able to like relate to it. I remember my social worker. She was in tears. Which was nice, you know, for her to be proud of like what we did and that. But I think as well with the play, to get research findings across in that way is a lot more interesting than, you know, just listening to somebody talk and, like, showing graphs and stuff like that.

The women also talked about lasting changes that they themselves had experienced since their involvement with the project. One had gone on to enter and win a poetry competition and had read out her poems on local radio and had them displayed on public transport. She felt that her achievements in the research project (performing in the plays and speaking to an academic audience when she was 'dizzy with nerves') and then speaking on the radio had inspired her daughter to take part in a choir through the school. Another of the women had herself joined a gospel choir, which she was thoroughly enjoying. Her children, who had been involved in the pantomime, had taken up dancing and acting classes and three years on were still doing these activities. Both women reported that these eventualities would have been inconceivable before taking part in the research and the arts projects. A third woman had enrolled in an undergraduate degree. Again, she admitted that she would not have had the confidence to do this prior to her involvement in the research, in particular performing the plays in front of an audience and speaking to academic audiences at the various conferences we attended.

Happily, the over-riding memories that the women had of the research project were those of it being 'fun'. They talked about forming friendships with people that they would not ordinarily have got to know. The process of rehearsing and performing the plays meant that participants got to know each other well, develop trust in one another and share in the nerves prior to the performance and the exhilaration afterwards. One of the mothers sums up the process: 'We had a laugh, didn't we?' Arts-based research has the potential to involve participants in an enjoyable and meaningful way and to equip them with vision and new skills. Its methods can produce rich, resonant and authentic data and transmit these to a wider, more diverse audience than a solely academic one. Like other forms of research, it is not possible to control how these findings are used, but the potential is there to address social issues, challenge the status quo and promote social justice.

## Notes

[1] This was funded through an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) CASE Award. Grant reference: PTA-033-2003-00024.

[2] Further funding through an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship enabled a re-visiting of the programme three years on to look at the lasting legacy of the research. Grant reference: PTA-026-27-1870.

[3] The Third Way is a political ideology which can be seen to have been enacted through policies notably by the Clinton administration in the United States and the New Labour government in the UK. Influenced by Anthony Giddens, the British sociologist, the Third way aims to reconcile left-wing and right-wing politics.

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