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The heroines of their own stories: Insights from the use of life history drawings in research with a transnational migrant community

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss how Life History Drawings can serve as a valuable method for global health research. The introduction discusses qualitative approaches to concepts such as reliability, validity and triangulation, and situates the use of participatory visual methods within the broader field of participatory research. The paper reports on an experience using life history drawings as part of extended ethnographic research in rural Mexico and among Mexican migrants living in Atlanta. The primary method for that parent project was comparative ethnographic research, which included life histories collected from 13 pairs of women over 15 months of participant observation. Early in the research, the drawings contributed to a major reorientation in the direction of the research project. The insights generated through analysis of the life history drawings exemplify how this participatory research technique can direct attention to social processes that feel salient to community members. In this case, they called attention to the enormity of social change in this community over one generation, reorienting the study from one focused on change causes by migration to one that focused on two trajectories of change: generational and migration-related.

Keywords

qualitative; participatory research methods; health; life history drawings; Mexico

Introduction

This paper discusses how a participatory research method, Life History Drawings, can contribute to global health research by increasing the reliability and validity of qualitative research through the targeted elicitation of insider perspectives on social change. It does so by describing their application within a multi-sited ethnographic exploration of gender, sexuality and reproductive health among Mexican women (Hirsch, 2003). The study initially employed the life history drawing method to generate information on study participants' most significant life experiences, with a goal of ensuring that the subsequent life history interview field guides included questions on culturally-significant life course events. The participatory drawings served this purpose, but they also generated compelling representations of women's dreams, losses, goals and values. These representations provided

an unusual source of data on the enormity of generational changes in family dynamics and structure in this Mexican community over the past 30 years and on the social context of reproductive health. Data from the drawings contributed to a substantial reorientation of the research, including a rethinking of the sampling plan so that it included diversity in generation as well as in relation to migration status.

We argue that life history drawings show promise as a means to enhance qualitative health research and in particular how the drawings can capture themes that reflect the experiences of the wider community of which the participants are members. We first describe how life history drawings fit into the broader field of participatory research and how the use of participatory methods for triangulation might strengthen the policy-relevance of qualitative research. We use the term qualitative methods to refer to the collection of textual, visual, and narrative data via methods that include interviews, participant observation, participatory methods, and focus groups. As such, both ethnographic research (which frequently relies in particular on participant observation and in-depth interviews) and participatory methods overlap with the broad category ‘qualitative methods.’ – but they are distinct from it in a number of ways, including the fact that both ethnography and participatory methods can include quantitative data collection. We then describe the research project within which the Life History Drawings were used and explain how the exercise was conducted and how the drawings were subsequently interpreted. This drawing method, which is uncomplicated, inexpensive and easily replicated, can help global health researchers – particularly those who do not have the luxury of extended periods of fieldwork – to produce more robust, reliable, and valid data.

Triangulating qualitative methods to enhance validity and reliability

The production of reliable and valid data is a critical element in policy-relevant research, since researchers are ultimately suggesting that their findings should be the basis for policy formation and the allocation of public resources. Over the past decade health researchers have increasingly used qualitative methods to reach hidden populations and to understand the social processes that undergird strongly quantified but poorly understood correlations (NIH, 2000). Despite the power of personal stories in shaping policy, qualitative data are still frequently regarded as less generalizable (and thus potentially less useful in shaping policy) than population-level surveys. Such assumptions reflect misunderstandings about the ways qualitative findings may be generalized. The paper draws on Popay’s (1998) definition: ‘... the aim is to make logical generalizations to a theoretical understanding of a similar class of phenomena rather than probabilistic generalizations to a population.’ We employ the terms reliability and validity based on their standard definitions for qualitative research: validity refers to the degree to which findings correspond with participants’ realities (or construction of realities) whereas reliability ensures that the findings are dependable and that the methods are described with enough detail for a future researcher to repeat the work. It is in this way, as discussed below, that participatory drawing exercises can enhance the reliability and validity, and thus generalizability of qualitative research—even short term fieldwork—by pointing to key forms of social difference, or meaningful social phenomena, within a community.

Understanding what generalizability means in qualitative research is a critical first step in considering how visual participatory methods can help produce research on social processes in one place that is useful in thinking about social context in other places. Mauss, in his classic work *The Gift* (1954/1990), called our attention to the uses and complexities of gifting relationships, providing an excellent example of what qualitative generalizability means. Gifting practices vary, but their importance in constructing society is of universal relevance. What is ‘generalizable’ from these works is the questions and concepts they generate and the ways in which they help build conceptual frameworks useful for exploring similar phenomena in other contexts. One would not, for example, expect to find a ceremonial exchange of pigs or yams connecting elites in Boston, but researchers might draw on the broad ideas described in Mauss’ work, or the very specific descriptions of gift-giving as productive of social bonds in other classic ethnographic monographs (Malinowski, 2002/1932), to look at how ceremonial gift giving creates social connections and marks social inequalities.

Participatory research and methods

Participatory research methods, which are increasingly recognized as valuable by public health researchers, involve sequential reflection and action conducted with and by communities versus the more traditional linear research model that conducts research ‘on’ communities (Khanlou & Peter 2005; Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). Participatory research emerged to address concerns that most research is conducted by relatively powerful and privileged people with subjects who are less so (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). Proponents of participatory approaches seek to ameliorate socially-organized power differences by including participants in a way that is substantial enough to affect the outcome of the research (De Koning & Martin 1996; Gatenby & Humphries 2000). De Koning and Martin write that the ‘researcher and participants develop a critical awareness of circumstances influencing their lives, reflect on what this means in their individual and communal situation and decide what action would be most important and feasible to take (1996, p. 5).

Participatory research has been used with increasing frequency in social science research as a way to include grassroots-level perspectives on public health problems and on their solutions (e.g., arts-based, visual methodologies) (Theron et al., 2011). Starting in the early 1970s geographers and psychologists had participants draw ‘mental maps’ to represent their local environments (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Methods then expanded through the early 2000s to include social maps that describe households and families, drawings that depict social hierarchies and stratifications, and participatory maps of the body (Theron et al., 2011). When drawings are used in research it is important to engage participants in talking about and making meaning of their own drawing, as participants are sometimes willing to use drawings to depict challenges they would not otherwise verbalize (Theron et al., 2011). This also ensures the researcher correctly interprets the drawing, and also allows for a collaborative research process (Guillemin, 2004).

It is important to distinguish between participatory research as a *process*, the goal of which is to ensure that the community has more control over research, and participatory research *methods*, the goal of which is to involve members of the community collaboratively in data

collection. Participatory research as a process necessarily involves methods of organizing a research project or collecting data that are participatory, but the use of participatory methods alone does not necessarily imply ceding (or even sharing) control of the research topic. Furthermore, as noted, the extent to which the research process is participatory does not necessarily correspond to a qualitative or ethnographic approach; it is possible to include an element of community participation in large scale surveys by working with the community to select the research topics, define the specific questions and share the results of data collection.

There are three general categories of visual participatory research methods that create opportunities for community-level participation in research: 1) video and photography; 2) music and theatre, and 3) drawings and pictures. Video and photography has been used to help asthma patients explore their perceptions of illness aetiology and coping strategies (Rich, Patashnick, & Chalfen, 2002) and as a strategy for the development of health education materials. Music and theatre co-produced or led by community participants, sometimes drawing on indigenous theatrical traditions, has featured music and performances that address health and social issues in their communities (Ghosh et al., 2006; Elkind, Pitts, & Ybarra, 2002). Pictorial approaches include body mapping (Cornwall, 2002), community mapping (Lynn et al., 2000), sexuality life lines (McConville, 1997), sunburst diagrams, pictorial bar charts, time lines and calendars (Kesby, 2000; Howson & Smith, 2000) and reproductive life lines (Stewart, 2000). If culture is the 'taken for granted' background that shapes everyday life, then analysing what people choose to draw and how they choose to draw it can be one way to see culture. In the following section, we discuss how life history drawings were used to understand goals and dimensions of value structures among rural Mexican women and female Mexican migrants in the U.S.

Using participatory research to study gender, sexuality and reproductive health

Sampling framework

These data were generated as part of a comparative ethnographic study with two primary objectives: 1) to explore differences in social constructions of gender and sexuality among women and men in rural Southwestern Mexico and among Mexican migrants in Atlanta, GA and 2) to see how these differences might contribute to variations in reproductive health practices in these two different locations of a transnational community. The drawings were collected in 1999 and 2000 as part of the first author's dissertation fieldwork; work with the community has been on-going since that time, with new work attesting to the continued or even intensified pace of generational change first identified through the life history drawings (Hirsch, 2003; Hirsch, 1999)

The core sample from the parent study included 13 pair of women who were either sisters, sisters-in-law or, in one case, best friends. In each pair, one of the women lived in Atlanta, GA, and the other was interviewed in her hometown in rural western Mexico. The initial plan for purposive sampling sought diversity based on marital status, parity, age, education, migration experience, and work experience; the women were systematically selected to

represent the social and economic diversity of the larger community (Hirsch, 2003). Of the migrant women, some had driver's licenses, working papers, and spoke English, while others spoke no English had no kin in Atlanta, and were thus far more dependent on their husbands than if they had remained in Mexico (Hirsch, 1999; Hirsch, 2003). Women who participated in the drawings (n=32) came from the first round of women recruited in rural Mexico. These women were all non-indigenous; the overwhelming majority of people in that part of the Mexico are Mestizo.

The primary data collection methods used during the 15 months of fieldwork were participant observation and 6 life history interviews with each of the 26 women in the core sample, exploring 1) childhood and family life, 2) gender and differences between life in the U.S and in Mexico, 3) the organization of productive and reproductive work in their families, 4) pregnancy, menstruation and reproduction, 5) fertility control and sexually transmitted diseases, and 6) sexuality in the context of courtship and marriage. The initial goal of the life history drawings was to ensure that the life history interview instruments included locally significant life cycle events. Given the project's reliance on life history narratives, the drawings were also useful as a technique for triangulation, since they provided women in the community an opportunity to represent their own vision of what a 'life history' was.

Subsequent reorientation

The life history drawings pointed to specific life cycle moments to include in the interviews, but they also contributed more generally to a reorientation of the study, which was initially focused entirely on examining migration-related change in gender, sexuality, and reproductive health, to examine generational changes. Reflecting that new interest in change over time, some life history informants over the age of forty were recruited into the core sample (adding diversity in addition to reproductive experience, social class, and location of residence), and eight of the life history informants' mothers were recruited for key informant interviews, with a new field guide written expressly to explore their perspectives on how gender, sexuality and marriage had changed over their lifetime.

These drawings helped build iterativity into the research design, ensuring that the data collection on women's life histories would include women's ideas about key moments in a life history. The initial life history interview field guide, for example, asked about women's memories of their childhood birthdays but this was dropped when pictures of quinceañera celebrations and migration-relation gifts suggested that these were more important markers of life transition and moments of socially-significant gift exchange. Seeing the drawings and talking with women as they produced them generated questions about first communions, graduation from primary school, quinceañeras, opportunities to work in the careers for which they had studied (for the few who had post-secondary education), and whether the tortillas they heated for their families were made from nixtamal they had taken to the mill to grind, or purchased at the corner store.

Experiences using life history drawings participatory method

Early on in the research in both Atlanta and Mexico fieldsites, the first author met with women – sometimes individually, but usually in groups – to explain that she was interested in learning about women’s lives in their community and wanted to ensure that she was asking about things that were important to them. These women were asked to draw after they had been recruited into the study and completed a qualitative interview. This allowed for a sense of rapport that facilitated the drawing process. She asked that women draw pictures of the most important moments in their past, present and future; there were no explicit instructions regarding what to draw. The women were provided with large sheets of blank newsprint and magic markers.

The researchers acknowledge that this process can be challenging if participants feel that their drawing skills make them appear unsophisticated in the way they represent their lives. However, these participants were also able to express their experiences verbally (and thus in more sophisticated ways) through the in-depth interviews and the conversation that accompanied the drawing process. The researcher also addressed power dynamics by working closely with the women to create a space where they could express their opinions through drawing (i.e., a ‘reassuring invitation to draw’) (Theron et al., 2011, p. 23), regardless of their drawing ability (e.g., by being reassured that it did not matter what the drawing itself looked like—the researcher frequently noted that she also used stick figures when asked to draw humans).

The analysis employed a method of similar to the critical visual methodology framework outlined in Rose (2001), which focuses on the drawing itself (i.e., the technological, compositional and social), as well as having the women describe what they drew and what it means to them (Guillemin, 2004; Mair & Kierans, 2007). Women were asked if they wanted to codify the issues, themes or theories that arose from their drawings; the drawings also served as prompts to ask why they had included a specific aspect of their drawing. After the subjects completed these drawings they discussed them as a group, which allowed participants to talk about the meaning in their drawings (Rose, 2001); this shared analysis also facilitates the production of valid and reliable knowledge (Guillemin, 2004). These drawings were referred to during subsequent individual interviews as a way to clarify specific aspects of the drawing, or verify whether emerging themes related to other participants’ drawings resonated with the women.

The analysis began by the researcher asking specific questions regarding what the drawing depicted and what it meant, its spatial organization and why people were (or were not) present (Cahill, 2007; Guillemin, 2004). Given the project’s specific goal of using the drawings to validate the substantive content of the life history interview guides, another part of the analysis was to look specifically for milestone events depicted in the drawings to make sure they were included in the subsequent interviews. The drawings also served as means to ensure that the a priori selected axes of diversity around which the sample was built actually represented the most critical forms of stratification within the community; as noted above, the drawings also led to the inclusion of a fourth axis of diversity in the sampling. The analytic approach was framed using different axes of diversity to compare the women (e.g., age, profession, residence, education levels, etc.), which helped the first author

to uncover themes related to generational differences in how women portray themselves as individuals and represent their own life history and future life course. This framework included examining which drawings were similar, and then assessing other similarities among the women who drew them. In addition, the broader themes of generational differences described by the women were discussed with men in the village in order to assess its relevance.

The goal of these drawings was to learn about how people see their world and what was important to them by examining differences in how people in the community represent themselves to an outsider. As such, these drawings should not be taken as transparent representations of truths about the community any more than interview data should be assumed to represent the ‘truth’ about an interviewee. Rather, the drawings should be seen as strategic representations, or visual portrayals of what each participant wanted the researcher to know about her life. These drawings were a process of self-crafting that revealed underlying value structures related to what a woman might want somebody to know about her and social position (e.g., whether to focus on her current life or future aspirations). Though rich in meaning, the interpretation and analysis of these drawings would not have been as nuanced in the absence of other data or contextual knowledge about the community (derived from the first author living there for 15 months). These drawings would remain useful, however, even without such ‘insider’ knowledge; they still paint the central themes in women’s lives.

Generational differences in life history drawings

The most important finding from the drawing exercise – the finding that led to a substantial shift in direction for the research project — was that the younger women had an entirely different sense than the older women of what it meant have a life history. (In both this analysis and the subsequent research, ‘younger women’ refers to women born in the 1960s and after, while ‘older women’ refers to women born before that). In spite of the fact that women were provided with the same instructions, and that the drawing groups were often mixed in age, the older women almost unanimously represented themselves by drawing pictures of their houses. There were differences in the ways younger and older women presented themselves and contrasted their former and current lives; these differences are discussed in more detail in the sections, below.

Drawing 1, by a woman who lives in an agricultural community, shows a well-kept traditional rancho house. The drawing depicts the quiet of dawn, with the moon hanging low and the sun just rising. Most women in the rancho rise early for their morning chores, and in the drawing we see how this woman, when asked what is important about her life, draws our attention to the products of her round-the-clock labour – the chickens, the clean yard, the flower pots.

In Drawing 2, by an older woman who grew up in a rural village but now lives in town, we see the gendered division of labour that characterized life in rural Mexico, with men planting and hoeing (the cowboy hats and large shoes indicate that they are men) while the women draw water and kneel to make tortillas on the comal. The drawing shows a number of physical features – the ox, the prickly pear cactus, the dry stone wall, the rows of corn plants

– that characterize rural life in Mexico, indicating both the challenges of a life of subsistence agriculture and a sense of place to which Mexicans who move to town, or to the U.S., feel intense nostalgia.

The strikingly different drawings of the younger women illustrate the vast social, economic and demographic changes that have occurred in Mexico in the past several decades. Rising rates of female education have transformed the lives of girls in rural Mexico. In 1960, census reports suggest that 32% of the population in this region of Mexico was illiterate; by 1990 that had dropped to 11% (Hirsch 2003, p. 166). While many young women in rural Mexico do not continue their studies beyond secondary school, it would be very unusual for a girl not to attend primary school. In many of these drawings, people sketched version of their younger selves, proudly going off to school. In the third frame of Drawing 3, for example, a young girl marches into a modern cement school building with a metal window frame. In the first frame of Drawing 4, a girl depicts herself studying, with the following caption: ‘it was in the year 1976 in my childhood, I went to school with my companions and I was very happy’. The third frames of drawings 5 and 6 depict an even higher level of educational attainment, with girls proudly displaying their high school diplomas.

The material conditions of everyday life in rural Mexico have changed radically over the past generation, even if most people in this community are still far from wealthy. The percentage of homes with running water in the county in which the research was conducted grew from 12% in 1960 to 92% in 1990; similarly, in 1960 only 4 % of homes had electricity, while in 1990 this figure was 97% (Hirsch 2003, p. 166). The second frame of Drawing 5, completed by a young woman from a relatively well-off family, depicts an elaborate quinceañera celebration, complete with a mariachi serenade and a bus trip for a group of friends to a mountain lake. In Drawing 7, a young woman from the rancho illustrates her past by showing her own splendid quinceañera celebration (for which her sisters who were migrants in Atlanta all contributed to the cost of her huge pink dress), followed by her pride at her family’s current access to electricity, and her bold dreams of car-ownership in the future.

The way social and economic change has remade the routine of daily life is also evident in the younger women’s inclusion of leisure time, toys, and play. While their mothers surely also played, it was unlikely they did so with toys such as the elaborate doll carriage shown in frame 1 of Drawing 8, in which the young girl’s arms seem overflowing with toys, or the balloons and balls deliberately referred to in the caption that accompanies the second frame of Drawing 3 (‘playing with balloons, balls, etc.’). The material transformation of everyday life is perhaps most obvious in Drawing 9, in which a well-to-do woman in Mexico contrasts her rural past (water from a pump, one-room adobe house with tiled roof, farm animals) with her current prosperity, as indicated by a car and a cement house with two well-furnished rooms featuring a refrigerator, a sink, a stove, furniture, a television, and art on the walls.

‘Now my husband is in the United States so we can finish building our house’

Migration and social status—The drawings of many women, both young and old, call attention to the omnipresence of migration as a source of social stratification and a strategy for social mobility. Drawing 10 shows a one-room house with a neat yard and tiled roof

(much like the drawings done by older women), but is distinguished by the antenna topping the roof. These antennas – supplanted in the 1990s by *antennas parabólicas* (satellite dishes) and now replaced by cable TV – were a luxury that was only accessible to those with a family member working in the U.S. They represent the economic success and continued commitment of this migrant to his (or her) home town and family, but they also indicate what Luin Goldring has referred to as ‘transnational systems of social status’, in which families in rural Mexico demonstrate and negotiate their social status through forms of consumption that are only available to those who earn in dollars (Goldring, 1998). The intertwining of migration and social-status oriented forms of consumption, of course, predates the television. In the 1970s, families tied into migration networks may have ensured the neighbours saw their new refrigerators and stoves, and in the 1950s and 1960s conspicuous consumption may have meant showing off store-bought clothes rather than those spun at home. In spite of the many ways in which the younger women’s drawings differ from those of their mothers and the older women, they share these references to the way in which the purchases made possible through migrant remittances are a key marker of local social status in these transnational communities. The ways in which these drawings highlight the use of consumption to mark migration-related social status in transnational communities illustrate how this type of participatory method can produce knowledge that is meaningful outside of its specific time and place.

The younger women’s drawings suggest that migration continues to be a key route to social mobility. In the third frame of Drawing 4, a woman shows her house under construction, with a caption she wrote: ‘in my future, I would like to have my house finished. Now my husband is in the United States to finish the house if God wills it’. In the third frame of Drawing 8, another young woman demonstrates a similar dream for her future – a finished (and furnished) house, and the chance to provide an education for her children – neither of which would be easily accessible to her without her husband’s earnings as a plumber in Atlanta. The cars featured in Drawings 5 and 7 are relatively common possessions for migrant Mexican women in the U.S.; for women who stay behind in rural Mexico, the social and physical mobility a car would offer is a distant dream.

The women’s drawings also frequently included features of life common in a transnational community. The gifts that return migrants bring are evident in the father’s suitcase in Drawing 11, as is the envy of those who do not have access to these gifts, which comes through in the caption to Drawing 12: ‘when my cousin went to California, I saw all of her clothes and everything that she put on, which was so nice, and I dreamed about coming to the U.S.’ That same woman, who currently lives in Atlanta, shows the hard work that migrants put into staying in touch in Drawing 13, which depicts talking on the phone with her mother in Mexico as one of the most important aspects of her ‘present’.

Heroines of their own stories—While all the drawings represented signifiers of consumption (e.g., a car or TV antenna) the differences between the younger and older women’s drawings focus attention on historical time, highlighting the many ways that life in rural Mexico has changed over the past generation – changes which have accelerated to a breath-taking pace since initial data collection (Hirsch & Vasquez, 2012). The younger women’s drawings, however, also direct our attention to individual chronological time and

the trajectories of women's lives; they seem to demonstrate a different idea than the older women's drawings about what it means to have a life history. Many of the older women's drawings present a house in one frame; when compared with the graphic novel orientation used by younger women, the older women's drawings suggest that being part of a family and a homeowner is the one thing they most wish to communicate about themselves. The older women's drawings seem to say 'I am my house', whereas the younger women's drawings communicate both that being a member of a family was the crucial aspect of identities and that younger women wish to represent themselves as individuals, with individually-variable life stories. The younger women's drawings tell us much more about the particularities of their achievements and relationships, hinting at the emergence of affective individualism in a way that resonates with the substantial social science literature on the phenomenon (Stone, 1979). With a narrative style that seems to draw on the Mexican popular tradition of fotonovelas (for example, in Drawing 3 small arrows on the top right hand corner of each frame instruct the naïve viewer of the order in which to read the story), the younger women are the heroines of their narratives; frame by frame, the drawings depict the highlights of these women's childhoods, courtships, and marriages, as well as their hopes for a prosperous and loving future. The sense of the passage of time over the life course is palpable from these drawings. They create an expectation of change, of development, implying that the choices women make matter, that they can shape their own lives, and that these women have clear hopes for what the future holds, both in terms of the affective quality of their marriages and their styles of consumption.

As is discussed at great length elsewhere (Hirsch, 2003) – and as is clear from the smiling, hand-holding couples in drawings three, six, seven and eight – the way that younger women depict their marriages in these drawings provides yet more evidence that marital ideals in Mexico have shifted towards an emphasis on emotional intimacy and cooperation as key criteria for the successful modern relationship. None of the older women, in fact, chose to draw themselves standing anywhere near their spouses. While this is hardly evidence that emotional or physical intimacy was unimportant to the older women, the stark generational difference in representations of intimacy underlines the way that intimacy has become more prominent as a feature of marital ideals.

Discussion

This shift in the research design and questions for this project was also, ultimately, key to the intellectual significance of the project – that is, its ability to answer the questions it purported to and to present the women's realities. This use of visual participatory methods to facilitate triangulation (i.e., validity) can be extended to other populations (e.g., racial and sexual minorities, rural populations, and children), as noted in Popay's (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998) definition of qualitative generalizability that focuses on understanding similar classes of phenomena rather than making statements about the likelihood it will occur across a population. Specifically, this research demonstrates how integrating participatory methods into qualitative research can generate questions and conceptual frameworks useful for exploring related phenomena in other contexts. A concrete example would be that these drawings remind us that other work on gender and sexuality, whether in

migration-related contexts or not, should attend to change over time rather than assuming that the social organization of gender or notions of personhood are unchanging.

Finally, in addition to the role the drawings played in shaping the overall project, they are compelling in and of themselves as representations of women's dreams, losses, goals and values. They provide an unusual source of data on changing notions of individuality, on how women have experienced the vast social and economic changes that have taken place in this Mexican community over the past 30 years and, ultimately, on the social context of reproductive health.

Guillemin (2004) notes that this type of drawing method works best to increase trustworthiness when incorporated into an ethnographic or interview project similar to that presented here. In addition to enhancing the validity and reliability of this life history research, the drawings generated compelling evidence of two critical forms of internal stratification within the community – generation and migration – and indeed these were ultimately the two axes of diversity around which the sampling was organized (Hirsch, 2003, p. 1–56). They served, then, to increase the significance of the data collected by pushing the research questions towards topics that were of great significance locally but that had not been included in the initial research design.

These methods are particularly useful for researchers who lack extended time in the field as they can be conducted quickly, at low cost, and in a group setting; analysis can also begin without transcription. Multiple studies have applied these methods in short periods of time with excellent results (Theron et al., 2011). An advantage of life history drawings is that they allow for iterativity because they produce immediately analysable data available to team members not based in the field; for team-based projects, in which the bulk of data comprises taped interviews, which must be transcribed and coded prior to analysis, this level of iterativity is rarely achieved.

It is important to note that what was produced through the drawings was likely affected by the positionality of the American researcher who, to many, represented modernity and consumption. For example, the participants often described inter-generational differences in stark and broad-brush strokes. Though these themes may have been emphasized more because of the researcher, this does not mean that such themes are not valid. Positionality is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Hirsch, 2003)

The limitations inherent in participatory research methods, particularly life drawings, also existed in this project. We addressed these limitations by working with the participants to have them explain the meaning in their drawing and why they chose to represent what that they did. However, as Mitchell and MacEntee (2011) note it is also important for researchers to understand the community context and thus be able to critically explore any potential limits of a particular participant or the group's perspective to avoid a positivist framework. The issue of validity is a common critique of visual methodologies, with claims that the interpretation of images is subjective and ambiguous (Guillemin, 2004). However, qualitative research acknowledges the existence of multiple truths, and that the images are strategic representations of what somebody wants to portray, not always a singular truth. To

address this critique the study analysed the drawings and the participants' interpretations of the drawings in conjunction with interviews and participant observation. The triangulation of these data increased validity by allowing participants multiple ways to express their experiences.

This research used ethnographic methods, with objectives developed by the researcher rather than by the community. As basic social science research, the goal was not to inform behavioural change or impact community-level health directly. However, data generated from this study have been cited in Ministry of Health reports to argue for an increased focus on migration as a risk factor for HIV infection (Magis-Rodríguez, Bravo-García, Gayet-Serrano, Rivera-Reyes, & De Luca, 2008).

Conclusions

These findings demonstrate how participatory research methods such as life history drawings can be a valuable tool in global public health research. By uncovering local phenomenon, and connecting them to broader social forces (which in the data presented here include consumption, changing notions of individuality and reproductive health) participatory research methods can increase the reliability and validity of qualitative research, with an ultimate goal of developing policy that takes into account both those critical social forces and the way people experience them.

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Figure 1.
Drawing 1.

Figure 2.
Drawing 2.

Figure 3.
Drawing 3.

Figure 4.
Drawing 4.

Figure 5.
Drawing 5.

Figure 6.
Drawing 6.

Figure 7.
Drawing 7.

Figure 8.
Drawing 8.

Figure 9.
Drawing 9.

Figure 10.
Drawing 10.

Figure 11.
Drawing 11.

Figure 12.
Drawing 12.

Figure 13.
Drawing 13.