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Exploring provocation as a research method in the social sciences

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores provocation as an approach towards social science research. While routinely used in natural science and arts research, this paper argues provocation might enable the social science researcher to initiate critical reflection amongst participants on issues that are often otherwise overlooked, obscured or accepted as naturalised practice. By assuming the role of provocateur, stimulator and/or agitator, the social science researcher can interrupt the flow of everyday life in order to illuminate and draw attention to complex social issues. Using research interventions that embrace, rather than deny, the socially constructed nature of the research process, provocation provides an alternative to largely non-obtrusive methods favoured in much social science research. This paper concludes by outlining the practical and methodological issues associated with this approach – in particular the complicated ethics of provoking reflection on topics that might not have otherwise come to the participant’s attention.

1. Introduction

While the research technique of provocation is regularly used in the natural sciences, and also in the creative arts, it has been used far less as an investigative approach in the empirical social sciences. In the natural sciences, provocation typically involves introducing a provoking stimulus into a controlled environment, enabling the researcher to make claims about the qualities of the stimulus being studied. In the creative arts, it is employed to provoke reactions and emotions in the audience, or to instigate new ideas and perspectives on everyday practices and objects. Drawing from these approaches, this paper argues that provocation could be a useful tool in the context of social science research, as it might work to interrupt the typical flow of everyday social processes so that social and cultural norms might be examined more critically.

This article begins by locating provocation in the social sciences literature and reviewing research and methods that share similarities or that are antecedent to this approach. It then explores how provocation has been used in areas outside the social sciences, demonstrating that there are various aspects of this technique that could be adapted and modified to create an innovative approach to social science research. In particular, this method might be seen as operationalising critical theory. Indeed, the mutual learning that takes place through a provocative research approach can scaffold a critical reflexivity for participant and researcher alike. Finally, it outlines a set of principles to provocation and considers the ethics associated with this approach.
2. Locating provocation in the social sciences

There are several research methods in the social sciences that are comparable with provocation. As a research approach, provocation might be thought of as obtrusive in that it seeks to interrupt everyday practices. However, what is being proposed in this paper is very different from some of the more infamous, provocative lines of inquiry, especially those applied in the fields of behavioural psychology and experimental criminology. For example, a massive (N = 689,003) Cornell study on Facebook and emotional contagion (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014) in which researchers manipulated users’ News Feed might be considered provocative in approach as it changed and omitted particular words and posts in individuals’ Facebook feeds to elicit a reaction in the participant. In this instance, provocation was used to gather data, however, it did so in a way that was potentially detrimental to the participant. Indeed, a correction at the front of the Kramer paper outlines the ethical concerns around informed consent associated with the study.

Other well-known provocative approaches in the social sciences include experimental criminology studies, where the bystander effect was explored (Latane & Darley, 1970). This generally involves unwitting participants in scenarios of staged shoplifting (Gelfand, Hartmann, Walder, & Page, 1973) or even violent theft (Schwartz & Gottlieb, 1976) in which there are potentially detrimental effects upon the participants. Studies in experimental psychology have also used a provocative approach to explore how situational pressures can transform human behaviour. For example, Zimbardo’s 1971 Stanford prison experiment demonstrated ‘how certain social situations can transform intelligent young men into perpetrators of psychological abuse’ (Zimbardo, 2007, n.p.). While no doubt transformative, the study had devastating effects on the participants involved. Unlike these examples, provocation in social science research might seek to interrupt, challenge and transgress social and cultural norms. However, it does so with the intention of bringing to light that which has been overlooked or obscured so that a more critical examination can take place. Such a process is dependent upon the active participation of the individual and is conducted with the underlying intention of potentially helping transform the individual’s future practices and behaviour for the better.

In this way, provocation could be likened to intervention research, which is typically associated with social work and psychology. The goal of intervention research is to achieve desirable behavioural or psychosocial outcomes in participants (Charles, Gorman-Smith, & Jones, 2016), meaning that it often involves testing programs or processes that work to achieve these ends (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010). In a similar way, action research, which is a method commonly used in educational research, also has the goal of addressing an issue or solving a problem. Action research often involves individuals working with others or in ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) to improve the way a particular issue is addressed or to develop guidelines for best practice. Associated with action research is participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), which, in a similar way, aims to ‘change social reality on the basis of insights into everyday practices’ (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, n.p.). While there is clearly a need for this kind of research, both action research and intervention research rely upon the fact that there are deficits, either in programs, processes or behaviours, which need to be improved. Indeed, coming from the more applied fields of social science (i.e. social work, education and psychology) there is a distinct goal and prescribed process involved in this type of research.

Despite innovations in method, particularly in the area of participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), several social scientists have called for new methods of inquiry that are not only ‘better equipped’ to understand the complex and distributed nature of the contemporary world (Law, 2004, p. 2; Law & Urry, 2004), but that also work to restore the ‘interplay’ between theory and method (Aradau & Huysmans, 2014; Savage, 2013, p. 14). While research in the social sciences requires a range of techniques and approaches to help understand and make sense of contemporary social phenomena, introducing new research methods into the field has significant consequences. Expanding beyond traditional research techniques opens up new theoretical perspectives and intersections and
also new ways of understanding the world. As Law and Urry (2004) argue ‘methods need to be understood as performative rather than representational … They are not simply techniques of extracting information from reality’, they are ‘instead within worlds and partake in their shaping’ (p. 598). Methods should therefore be thought of not as simply representing the social world, but enacting them (Law & Urry, 2004).

With this in mind, provocation might be considered a method that enacts particular aspects of the social world – aspects that are either tacitly known or understood, or accepted as naturalised practice. Given that an aim of provocation is to encourage critical reflection and potentially transform behaviours, provocation could also be thought of as a method that encourages researchers to consider the kind of world that is enacted through the research process. Approached in this way provocation can be thought of as a method, a methodology, a concept, and, even attitude, which is adopted by the researcher toward understanding the complex nature of social phenomena. An antecedent theory relevant to provocation is Aradau and Huysmans (2014) conceptualisation of research methods as ‘devices’ and ‘acts’. Their argument that methods are devices, which ‘experimentally connect and assemble ontology, epistemology and theory and worlds by putting them into knowledge generating action’ (p. 605), helps to frame the way provocation might operate in the research process. Not only might it bring to light or uncover implicit understandings and practices, but it also aims to generate new insights and knowledge. In this way it can ‘disrupt particular scripted, ordered enactments of the world’ (Aradau & Huysmans, 2014, p. 611). However, as knowledge and theories of the social world are interlinked with research methods, it follows that generating new perspectives and new ways of thinking about social phenomena requires new research methods. As Law (2004) argues, ‘we will need to teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using methods unusual to or unknown in social science’ (p. 2). Turning to research outside the social sciences helps to develop how provocation can be used to develop a critical research method.

3. The role of provocation outside social science research

3.1. Provocation in the natural sciences

One of the most straightforward applications of provocation is in medical science research, where the approach is used to determine the effects of a particular stimulus. For example, participants will be administered a provoking stimulus – an allergen or drug for example – and the physiological effect on the individual is measured. This is common in immunology and allergen testing, where a patient is exposed to controlled levels of allergens in order to evaluate their sensitivity (Dordal et al., 2011; Litvyakova & Baraniuk, 2001). However, it can also be used to test the safety of a particular drug (Ramam, Bhat, Kumar, & Sharma, 2012) or to determine the correlation between a particular stimulus and a physiological state (Liebowitz et al., 1985). In all of these instances, a provocative stimulus will be administered and the effects measured.

In this context provocation is obtrusive – the goal is to elicit a response, so that the effect of the stimulus can be determined. This enables the researcher to make claims about the stimulus (i.e. potency, quantity) and the patient’s physiological reaction to it, so that a cause and effect relationship can be established. While such a specific focus might initially seem at odds with the objectives of social science research, isolating a particular situation for close, critical examination might reveal a perspective that is less easily observed with non-obtrusive methods. While medical science research typically takes place in an artificial environment, like a laboratory or a hospital, the researcher is able to make claims about similar situations encountered by the patients in the ‘natural’ world. It is therefore worthwhile considering whether using provocation in social science research might afford a more critical perspective that could be personally transformative for the research participants in their daily practices.

Besides medical research, provocation is being used in conjunction with other fields of science, to augment findings and in some instances to positively transform behaviour. In this context provocation
usually assumes a visual or physical form and again is used to elicit a response in the individual. This time, however, the reaction to the provocation is correlated with another set of measures, like an individual’s physical or genetic constitution or other medical interventions. In this way, provocation is used to support the findings of other research techniques. For example, in a study on the ‘warrior gene’ individuals with the so-called gene were shown to demonstrate higher levels of aggression in response to the provocation (McDermott, Tingley, Cowden, Frazzetto, & Johnson, 2009). In neuroscience, provocation was used to attenuate a purely scientific approach to understanding the brain and cognition (Rowson, 2011). Provocation in this context was used to supplement other more objective scientific interventions, potentially leading to positive behavioural changes, particularly in addressing addictive behaviours. In this context provocation complements other research techniques to build a more detailed understanding of a phenomena and, if necessary, to help transform practices.

3.2. Provocation in the arts

Provocation is also used regularly in contemporary art, where artists will create a stimulus or situation that seeks to unsettle or disrupt the viewer’s perspective on the world. In doing this, the artwork encourages the audience to consider a different, more critical, perspective on the broader social, political or cultural issues that frame the work. While the image or spectacle might initially seduce the viewer into the frame, a provocative element in the work disrupts their expectations by adding, challenging or manipulating familiar tropes. This could be achieved in a number of ways: decontextualising a particular phenomenon; re-appropriating an item or idea, or in the case of performance art, distorting the body or enduring a discomforting situation. In each of these examples the goal is to elicit a reaction in the viewer, which might encourage them to occupy a more critical perspective on the issues that underpin the work. For example, in some of his works artist Cameron Bishop uses digital media to animate early Australian Impressionist (also known as the Heidelberg School) paintings to include contemporary icons like astronauts, space shuttles and riot police. The re-appropriated works disrupt the familiar narrative of Australia’s past and encourage the viewer to consider a more critical reading of colonisation and national identity (Pangrazio, 2013). In the visual arts the potential exists for the provocation to be obtrusive, particularly if the work is politically motivated and seeks an affective response in the viewer or transgresses particular taboos (Winn, 2012). Obviously the outcome of the provocation is variable depending on the audience and the artist’s intentions, however, unsettling or challenging views is a common strategy used in contemporary art.

The idea of provocation is also used in the area of design, particularly as a means of researching innovative thinking and creative production. In this approach the researcher might present participants or designers with a provocative stimuli – such as an image or social scenario – to encourage a different way of thinking about a problem or situation. In design, provocation is used to obfuscate the ‘norms and conventions’ (Bardzell, Bardzell, Forlizzi, Zimmerman, & Antanitis, 2012, p. 289) inscribed in an object in order to expand the range of possibilities and encourage a more critical approach to production. In this context, provocation seeks to transgress social and cultural norms of design to ‘enrich and expand our experience of everyday life’ (Dunne, 2006, pp. 45-46). Provocation is therefore seen as a way of disrupting design processes that are often ‘hardwired’ into people's choices. In a similar way, Heinonen and Ruotsalainen (2013) used provocation to generate collaborative and creative thinking about the future. In their Futures Clinique, a workshop designed to promote futures thinking and innovation, provocation was used to ‘call forth novel ideas and unexpected reactions from under the surface of everyday cognition’ (p. 7). Researchers presented new information to participants on ‘futures thinking and research’ (p. 5) in order to expand the range of possibilities and encourage new insights. In both these examples, provocation was used to suspend typical processes or thought patterns so that new and innovative ideas might be explored.

In the dramatic arts an analogy to provocation can be found in the work of twentieth century playwright and director Bertolt Brecht, who sought to break through the invisible ‘fourth wall’ of theatre by having actors engage the audience in dialogue. Unlike traditional theatre in which the audience
was passive, Brecht’s more experimental plays provoked the audience to engage with the director’s intentions, adding their own thoughts and ideas to the work. This approach led to a shift in power relations between director, audience, actors and others who participated in the work, encouraging both collective and multiple interpretations of it. As Barnett (2015) explains, the active audience participation in Brecht’s plays meant ‘meaning-making is no longer the responsibility of the director, but is negotiated over time as the ensemble engages with the concrete problems of the play’ (p. 145). Provoking the audience in this way challenges the roles occupied by those involved with Brecht’s work, simultaneously shifting the way meaning is made in and of the work. More controversially, the early twentieth century French poet and director, Antonin Artaud, aimed to subvert the traditional conventions of theatre by ‘pushing the audience to a painful collective release of their subconscious, through cruelty’ (Sharpling, 1998, p. 526). In this context, cruelty was forcing the audience ‘to confront their own cultural inheritance, and ultimately the eroticism and violence which lay repressed in their own subconscious’ (Sharpling, 1998, p. 527). In a similar way to design, provocation is used in the dramatic arts to forge new ways of thinking about the theatre and the roles and experiences of the participants. Innovative approaches in practice are thought to build new ontological, epistemological and theoretical understandings and intersections.

While this is not a definitive exploration of how provocation has been applied in research, it illustrates the aims that underpin its application. As a method of generating knowledge across natural science and the arts, however, provocation is being used for a range of reasons:

- To test the effects of a stimuli so that a detailed understanding of the physical response is generated;
- to correlate physiological and behavioural responses with the genetic and physical constitution of a patient;
- to complement other research techniques;
- to generate new, perhaps more critical perspectives on social, cultural and political issues;
- to draw out subconscious or tacit understandings;
- to prompt new ways of thinking and designing.

The goals of social science research might be somewhat different from the disciplines outlined above however the complexity of the contemporary context requires a range of techniques to understand and unpack the social dynamics at play. Indeed, provocation as a research method might even work to transform the practices of individual participants, as well as generating new insights for social research and wider society alike.

4. Provocation as critical research method

Considering how provocation has been used to generate knowledge and insight in other disciplines expands the methodological possibilities available to the social science researcher. Drawing from natural science, provocation can be used to isolate a particular phenomena or concept for critical examination or correlate a provoked response to other known variables. Drawing from the arts, provocation can lead to the creation of new, critical perspectives, as well as generating thinking that might transgress social and cultural norms. In this way, the social researcher becomes a provocateur prompting new perspectives on specific social issues and materialising and documenting this new knowledge in a systematic way. This might be thought of as a practice based or emergent way of ‘creating’ knowledge for the researcher and the participant. As Barrett (2007) explains practice led research is ‘a new species of research’ adopting a ‘generative enquiry that draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research’ (p. 1). Opening up a dialogue between the various approaches to provocation means these insights can be shared beyond their conventional and historical application.

By assuming the role of provocateur the researcher might avoid some of the problematic issues that stem from the socially constructed nature of the research process. If, as Morgan (1983) argues,
research is a ‘distinctively human process through which researchers make knowledge’ (p. 7) then the social dynamics that exist between the researcher and the researched need careful consideration. In some respects provocation could assist this situation in that the focus is shifted onto the response of the individual to a particular prompt, rather than the individual themselves. The findings here might be drawn from the active response of participants, meaning they have more control over what is being perceived by the researcher, and therefore, potentially more agency in the research process. Provocation might therefore inculcate a process of mutual learning between researcher and participant that is, in many respects, dependent on the critical reflexivity that takes place during the research process.

Provocation has the potential to afford social researchers alternate ways of working with participants, avoiding the tendency to position them as either passive agents or all-knowing experts on a given topic. This is of particular concern when working with children and young people. As a result, particular attention has been directed at working ‘collaboratively and non-exploitatively’ (Robinson & Gillies, 2012, p. 87) with participants in order to redress unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched. Lomax (2012) explores creative visual methods as a way of subverting this power dynamic by resisting the tendency to approach child participants as either ‘passive agents of “becoming”’ (p. 105) or as the valorised ‘all-knowing and all-seeing child’ (p. 106). Provocation might work similarly as the participants are not only encouraged to have more control over what is being interpreted by the researcher but, drawing on a more scientific interpretation of the approach, provoking serves as a kind of ‘calibration’ of the consistency of participants’ response, particularly if provocation is used in conjunction with other research methods. In this way provocation offers another way of working that neither exploits nor over-privileges the voice of the participant.

Like creative visual methods, provocation could be thought of as generating ‘multiple voices’ through this approach, offering ‘different rather than superior knowledge’ (Lomax, 2012, p. 115). This process provokes the participant to become a ‘creative agent’ (Bardzell et al., 2012) in responding to the social issue under examination. In this light provocation is creative, participatory and provocative. Provocation as a research approach might open up multiple perspectives not only for the researcher to consider in relation to the participant, but also for the participant to occupy during the research process. In this way, the provocation initiates a dialogue between participants and the researcher prompting self-reflection for both parties. In generating multiple voices and perspectives on the social phenomena in question, provocation can be thought of as using a process of ‘crystallisation’ (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), to materialise knowledge and collect data. As Ellingson (2009) explains, while research in art and science might be situated at opposite ends of the methodological ‘spectrum’, most social researchers situate themselves somewhere in the vast middle ground, borrowing from both sides of the spectrum. Provocation can therefore be thought of as bringing the arts, the social sciences and the natural sciences together in such a way that might be ‘mutually transformative’ to all disciplines (Back, 2012, p. 33).

5. Principles of provocation

Having established the theoretical context of provocation, it is important to consider how this might be applied as an approach to social research. As just described, provocation draws from natural science and the arts in order to examine a particular social phenomenon in such a way that not only generates knowledge on a particular topic, but is potentially transformative for the participants. This approach might be thought of as operationalising critical theory by provoking participants to think analytically about the social and cultural norms associated with a particular phenomenon. Indeed, the process of provocation might provide a space where these norms are transgressed, if only momentarily. What follows is an explanation of the principles that underpin provocation as a research approach. This is an emergent set of principles, with flexibility to be applied to a variety of social research projects.
5.1. Critical distance

Provocation as a research approach seeks to disrupt the flow of everyday life enabling closer scrutiny of how particular social phenomena affect the individual. In the first instance, this is achieved by asking the participants to voluntarily participate in the research at a designated site away from familiar everyday contexts. In this way provocation ‘disengages’ the participants from the immediate effects of the context in which this phenomena might normally be experienced, establishing a critical distance between the individual and the issue under scrutiny. While this might be common to other approaches in social science research (i.e. interviews), provocation seeks to use the socially constructed space of the research setting as a site for data collection and critical intervention. This could be contrasted with other approaches to social research in which the researcher observes people and culture in a more ‘naturalised’ setting. For example, New Literacy Studies often takes an ethnographic approach to data collection where the influences of social and cultural practices upon literacy are identified in context, at school or in the home for example (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1982). In addition, many approaches to researching the digital context occur in situ, where large sets of data are collected in ‘real time’ (Uprichard, 2012). These are effective approaches to social research, but they also present challenges. For example, it can be difficult for the researcher to disentangle an individual response to a particular phenomenon from the influence of the immediate context and the people in it. Similarly, the use of big data in digital methods leaves the researcher with an inevitable tension over whether to take a sample of the available data and generalise it, or to take the whole data-set and reduce it (Uprichard, 2012). Provocation might offer another approach to social research, capitalising on the critical distance that the research setting and process inevitably establishes and the ability to focus on a particular issue for critical examination, including how it has evolved across time. From this perspective, interpretations and understandings of the social phenomena in question that are more established in the minds of participants might be, to some degree, distanced, if not suspended altogether.

Provocation affords the researcher the ability to focus on how a particular social phenomenon affects the individual and society more broadly. While these issues can never be fully extricated from the complex social milieu, the effective application of provocation in natural science research suggests that there might be benefit in isolating a particular issue for close examination. This can serve to complement other known information (i.e. ethnographic or interview data) in a more socially ‘controlled’ setting. More importantly, decontextualising social issues for inspection can reveal elements that were not obvious before. A provocative approach might, therefore, encourage participants to consider things such as who seeks to benefit from a particular social issue, how it is intertwined with cultural interpretations of texts, and what are the established patterns of representation that it encourages.

5.2. Materialising thinking

A second principle of provocation could be thought of as materialising thinking. This helps to ensure that the research is mutually beneficial to both researcher and participant in that materialising how we think about a social issue is potentially illuminating, and possibly transformative, to both parties. Assuming the role of provocateur, the researcher may do this in one of three ways, they might: present new information to the participants for them to consider; decontextualise a naturally occurring practice; or translate an idea across materials to create a new or different interpretation of an issue. These techniques can work separately or in tandem to materialise the thinking behind the social issue under scrutiny and/or the thinking of the participant in response. In some instances, both types of materialisation could take place. In doing this, new perspectives on social issues are generated, thereby affording a more critical and reflective response. As Carter (2004) writes, if the social processes behind an art work are explored creativity and creative research has the potential to re-examine and reinvent human relations. In the first instance, presenting new information to participants might be as straightforward as presenting some facts or ideas on an issue that are either unknown to the participants or have become accepted as naturalised common sense. As will be described later, it is how the researcher
then ‘activates’ this new information in the participant through a process of critical reflection, creation or re-appropriation for example, that is key to a provocative approach.

Alternatively, decontextualisation might provide a closer inspection of the materiality of a particular concept or object. As Hayles (2002) argues ‘materiality depends on how the work mobilises its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user’s interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops – strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks’ (p. 33). Bearing this in mind, the process of decontextualising ideas works closely with the materiality of a particular concept, event or issue, which might in turn help to reveal the concepts and ideologies that underpin it. As an example of how this might occur, Hochman and Manovich (2013) adopt a ‘spatio-temporal visualisation’ of millions of Instagram photos to gain insight into the social, cultural and political patterning of social media. While this is not provocation, presenting decontextualised materials (i.e. Instagram photographs), what Hochman and Manovich call ‘Phototrails’, to participants might be. Such a process works by dislodging the phenomena (social media) from its socially embedded state so that cultural patterns might be exposed and analysed. In this way, the social and cultural norms that surround the phenomena are momentarily transgressed. The participants’ response becomes quite clearly focused on a particular social phenomenon. The process of empirical ‘data’ generation, therefore, provides individual participants with an opportunity to reflect upon, and potentially transform, their own practices.

Closely aligned with decontextualisation is the idea of translation, i.e. supporting research participants to create new interpretations of social phenomena. This involves translating ideas across media to reveal different, often hidden, aspects of a social issue. For example, it might involve supporting participants to create a visual response to a piece of writing or the creation of a model to represent less tangible structures and concepts, like the internet, for example. Translation lends itself to participatory visual methods of collecting data with one benefit being that responses are not confined to language or literacy (White, Bushin, Carpena-Mendez, & Ni Laoire, 2010). It also draws on a hermeneutic approach, where the interpretative elements of the creation reveal something about the participant’s response to a social issue. In this respect, the focus is not just the ‘creation’ that results from the process of translation, but instead what it reveals about the thoughts and interpretations of the participant. For example, the researcher might make particular note of the colours, textures or modal choices used to translate the idea. Approaching translation as a process avoids some of the dilemmas experienced when the aesthetic outcomes of visual methods are exhibited or in some way ‘predetermined’ by the researcher (Mand, 2012). Used as part of a provocative approach, the creation resulting from the translation is not the end goal, but instead a critical tool to reveal or explore the participant’s thinking on a particular subject.

5.3. Reflection and transformation

Finally, encouraging a space and process for reflection would build on the ideas and perspectives that emerge from earlier stages of provocation. As Boler (1999) writes, to be genuinely transformative to the individual and society, such reflection should move beyond the self and take on a more critical orientation. She puts forward the idea of critical self-reflection, which is more than simple ‘self-reflection’ (p. 177); it involves a degree of ‘discomfort’. Following the work of Pratt (1984/1988), Boler outlines a process in which the ‘genealogies of self’ are traced, so that the individual begins to acknowledge and honour the ‘genealogies of one’s own positionalities and emotional resistances’ (1999, p. 178). In doing so, the participants are encouraged to consider how their interpretations, identities and practices to social phenomena are shaped not only by their personal histories, but also by a variety of discourses – be they institutional, social, cultural or political. In some instances, materialising thinking might reveal latent understandings of particular social processes held by the participant. Creating a space for critical self-reflection provides participants with an opportunity to scrutinise and explore these newfound perspectives.
For critical self-reflection to be encouraged, Heinonen and Ruotsalainen (2013) suggest, it might draw on, or ‘activate’, that which sits in the participant’s ‘peripheral vision’. Essentially, this brings what is at the exterior of the participants’ consciousness to the centre, for more focused exploration and examination. They argue that peripheral vision is one way to ‘perceive the broad and systemic context of different issues’ (p. 7). Given the connected and networked nature of the social world this seems a beneficial perspective to cultivate, and one that is often overlooked in the routine practices of everyday life. Critical self-reflection might be fostered through opportunities for both collective reflection and individual thought. Listening to and learning from the experiences of others can be a liberating experience, building new insights and understandings, as well as empathy in individuals. However, ‘group think’ can also become problematic. As Heinonen and Ruotsalainen (2013) explain ‘collective thinking with its conventionalism tends to undermine radical, individualistic creativity’ (p. 7). A challenge to this stage of the provocative research process is therefore ensuring that collective reflection does not hamper or undermine more radical individual ideas. This tension might be resolved by the creativity involved in materialising thinking – translation and decontextualisation – enabling individual interpretation and expression of ideas in response to the new information presented. A provocative approach, however, also requires the researcher to question, provoke and encourage the participant to reach deeper levels of engagement and insight.

Finally, the participant might be prompted to re-appropriate particular concepts or symbols associated with the social phenomena under investigation to apply the new perspectives and ideas that have emerged throughout the process. This might involve re-designing or re-writing particular concepts, fostering a sense of agency in the participant. Such a technique might take its cues from: culture jamming (Carducci, 2006) or ‘the appropriation of a brand identity or advertising for subversive, often political intent’ (p. 117); artistic interventions around social media (Douglas & Niehaus, 2013), which interrupt the interface in such a way that encourages the user to consider the ‘internalised value of social media’ (p. 262) and how this affects us personally and politically; or détournement (Dur & Wark, 2011), which seeks to overturn the idea of culture as private good, dissolving ‘rituals of knowledge’ and re-appropriating ‘intellectual property for the collective’ (p. 40). Re-appropriation might also involve considering complicated social processes. In this situation, the more fitting approach might be to ask the participant how things might be done better or what can be done to change a particular situation. As a fitting conclusion to the provocative research approach, the main point is to demonstrate that change and transformation are possible. As with each of these principles the suggestions and ideas are speculative, meaning a range of other techniques might also be used to enact the same research approach i.e. create a critical distance, materialise thinking and encourage reflection and transformation.

6. Ethical considerations

As a provocateur, the researcher challenges participants to engage with difficult ideas and concepts not previously considered, and this may stir up adverse emotions and feelings of discomfort for both the researcher and the researched. While the ethics of this situation need careful consideration, Preser’s (2016) notion of a ‘methodology of damage’ suggests that negative or awkward research methods might actually be more realistic because they approach ‘society not as an abstraction’, but instead as composed of ‘actual bodies’ (p. 10). This approach may well be an ‘invitation to vulnerability’, however it is also ‘a structure and ethic of research that does not aim for exit points from injuries by extracting comforting stories and structuring them into analytic categories’ (Preser, 2016, p. 10). In this way, methodological processes which are awkward or in some way discomforting might uncover another set of possibilities that shape future research and education or may even echo in daily discussions. Indeed, in uncovering what cannot be known or what is discomforting or damaging is essentially reaching toward new understandings that were previously unknown. As Lather (2007) argues there are inherent tensions between the researchers’ ‘desire to know’ and the ‘limits of representation’, however, ‘a failed account occasions new kinds of positionings’ (p. 38).
While operationalising critical theory and encouraging participants to consider confronting or challenging aspects of self and society may well be discomforting, provocation seeks a form of ‘rehabilitation’ in the final stage of the research process. Transformation encourages participants to act on their new insight, demonstrating and modelling the idea that that the individual has agency in the world. While the resulting re-appropriations might be humble in scope, on another level they work to channel any negativity that has emerged throughout the research process into some form of positive change. While riskier, a provocative approach to research has the potential to resonate more strongly with lived experience and therefore genuinely transform the individuals’ social experiences. Indeed, often experiencing something that is arduous or unpleasant has, in the longer term, more impact on the individual, particularly if it is something that they take forward into their future experiences.

This cycle of disruption, revelation and transformation is a common pattern used in the visual arts and could work as an exemplar for provocation as a research method. Bianca Hester’s work, for example, *A World, Fully Accessible By No Living Being* (2011), demonstrates that provoking the individual to more critical insights can be not only transformative, but also healing. The work was composed of a series of propositions that interrupted urban spaces ‘to provoke strategies for addressing the ways that these spaces are constructed, cultivated, regulated and negotiated’ (Hester, 2011). One of the propositions was a wall of cinder blocks erected in a central piazza; another a printed vinyl banner of a wall strategically placed on the steps of Parliament House in order to symbolically engage with the ‘authoritarian edifice’ (Hughes, 2012, p. 44). What was interesting about these works was that, by chance, they coincided with the Occupy Movement taking place in the city at the same time. While initially disruptive to the citizen’s experience, the propositions took on a decidedly political orientation, which catalysed discussion and reflection on the occupation of public spaces. Indeed, people of different cultural backgrounds and ages began to meet and converse in front of the cinder walls. This might be where a provocative approach differs from a methodology of damage, providing some recourse to the ethical concerns raised. As with Hester’s work, there is a redemptive quality to provocation, as it allows for self-reflexive, critical and sometimes negative insight into everyday practices, however, this becomes the catalyst for positive change.

7. Concluding remarks

This paper has outlined how provocation might be used in social research to encourage critical examination of complex issues. Such an approach might be thought to operationalise critical theory or initiate reflection and consideration of issues that have become so enmeshed with daily life as to become unconscious processes. In part, what provocation seeks to do is make these social practices visible again, so they might be consciously re/evaluated and critiqued. Such new perspectives open up the possibility of transforming future behaviours and practices for the better, so that a final stage of this approach is the re-appropriation, redesign or reconceptualisation of the more negative or controversial issues that have been identified and explored throughout the research process.

One of the benefits in using a provocative approach is that it opens up a dialogue between researcher and participant, encouraging critical reflection and mutual learning for both parties. In this way the provocation itself is an axial point around which new perspectives, positions and interpretations might be generated. As a research method, provocation not only collects data on particular social issues, but also seeks to transform the individual and society for the better. The paper outlines a process to achieve this, however, as this is a provisional method it is hoped that other useful techniques may emerge and evolve over time. While the ethics of provocation might be more complicated than less obtrusive methods, there are other benefits to this research approach as it potentially advances participants’ understandings of self and society.
Note


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Notes on contributor

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