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# Re-connecting with cultural heritage: How participatory video enabled youth in Palestine to protect their cultural heritage

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## Introduction

*We need to tell people, not just in Palestine but all over the world, what a group of university students are working on and how important this project is. This is our culture, and it is our responsibility to save it. I think it is the youth's responsibility because we have the energy, we are educated. I have learned so much (Sameeha Hureini).<sup>1</sup>*

It is a hot day in Al Qaritaen, a Palestinian village occupied by Israel in 1948, which is today situated within Israel. The man in front of us, an 87-year-old named Abu Sabha, is animated: “I was born here and I want to die here” he says about the village where he was born into a family of five children. A group of four youth researchers with the support from the oral history trainer Mahasen Rabus are getting ready to interview him about his home village, and there is a lot of excitement and positive tension in the air. Fatima, one of the female youth researchers, is rehearsing the interview questions which she prepared in advance. She and Khalil, one of the other researchers, will conduct the interview together. Fatima is especially interested in documenting the villages around South Hebron Hills (SHH). Another member of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Sameeha Hureini, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2018, Al Twani, South Hebron Hills.

the team, Mahmoud, is setting up his video camera and ensuring the microphone is in working order. He is very enthusiastic and passionate about photography and has taken many photos as part of their research. Khalil and Fatima have to walk faster in order to keep up with Abu Sabha, who is eager to show us around his village, take us to the cave where he lived, and share memories and stories with the group. For the next 1.5 hours, the youth researchers will listen to Abu Sabha as he narrates his life story and the way they lived. He will tell them how life was before the occupation in 1948 and about the traditions and ways of life that were important to him and his family.

Fatima, Mahmoud, and Khalil are part of the “On Our Land” research project which trained 30 young Palestinian researchers from SHH between 2017 and 2019. The youth researchers (YR) learned to use oral history methodologies and video recording to document the life stories and the cultural heritage of the area’s older generations. The YRs went on to record over 100 hours of oral history interviews and took hundreds of photos to capture life in the area.

The SHH area is made up of 32 villages in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), which is inhabited by Bedouins and non-Bedouin Palestinians. The Bedouin communities of Palestine have a rich cultural heritage, which combines a vivid oral tradition, pastoral and agricultural practices, food and drink, and traditional arts and handicrafts, and this culture is intertwined with that of their non-Bedouin Palestinian neighbours. The Bedouins’ heritage is at risk as a result of the Israeli occupation, which has had a serious impact on how Bedouins share their lived cultural heritage between generations and communities. The creation of Israeli closed military zones in SHH; the imposition of severe restrictions on movement between Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank; and evictions of communities have threatened the existence of traditional ways of life. The protection of cultural heritage has become a low priority for

many when compared to pressing needs such as jobs, education, or legal protection (B'Tselem, 2020).

This chapter demonstrates how the youth researchers involved in the “On Our Land” project combined a participatory video approach with oral history methodologies to exercise agency and power as they reconnected with their cultural heritage and history. Their work is examined in the context of the Palestinian concept of *Sumud*, which means resilience and/or steadfastness in Arabic. *Sumud* helps to account for the stories the researchers were told about the lives of people in SHH communities, as well as the effects that the “On Our Land” project and its practices had on the researchers themselves. An original, conceptual framework of typology of *Sumud* was developed for this research and it was based on resistance and resilience literature, as well as on data analyses of the interviews we conducted with the project’s youth researchers and stakeholders. The framework is employed here to analyse the engagement of the YRs and how they developed increased levels of confidence and pride in their heritage and land.

The chapter will critically assess the challenges involved in conducting participatory research in small communities in Palestine. It will consider how the challenges created by conflicting interests were overcome and how gender was negotiated within the space of the group and community. We will discuss the issues that the youth researchers faced on the journey they undertook as they collected stories. We will also show how the youth researchers were able to unveil aspects of the history of their communities, become experts on it, and use it to protect their own cultural heritage, which they regard as their “treasure” (Sameeha Hureini).<sup>2</sup>

## **Context and methodology**

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Sameeha Hureini, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2018, Al Twani, South Hebron Hills.

The Oslo Accords of 1993 divided the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) into three administrative areas: Area A, under the full civil and military control of the Palestinian Authority; Area B, under Palestinian civil control and joint military control by Israel and the Palestinian Authority; and Area C, under the full civil and military control of Israel. The South Hebron Hills area is located in Area C, which comprises more than 60% of the West Bank. Most of the people who live in Area C are doubly marginalised: first by the Israeli occupation and then by the Palestinian Authority, which is subject to restrictions that limit its ability to provide the area with infrastructure or investment. The area consists of over 30 Palestinian villages, but Israel only recognises two of them: Al Twani and Al Mnazil. The majority of the villages are situated in an area that was designated as a closed firing zone by the Israeli army in the early 1980s, and Israeli settlements have been built on Palestinian land and near to some of the villages. The area is home to over 4,000 Bedouin Palestinians who were displaced from the Negev in 1948, as well as other Palestinian farming communities (B'tselem, 2020; Nasasra, 2017).

The Bedouin and farming communities in the SHH have managed to maintain a balanced semi-nomadic way of life that involves them in basic cultivation and herding. They have a rich cultural heritage; however, due to the effects of the Israeli occupation, Bedouins and other Palestinian farming communities face stark challenges as they try to share their lived cultural heritage between communities and generations. Of all the forced displacement cases in Area C, 92% have taken place in Bedouin farming and herding communities (UNDP, 2013). Restrictions on movement and constructed borders, as well as the other practices through which the occupation affects the area's economy and geography, prevent the communities from engaging in traditional cultural practices and keep them disconnected from one another. Given the pressing nature of other competing demands on their time and attention, such as employment and education, cultural heritage protection has been a low

priority for many of the communities. Palestinians have to deal daily with harassment from the Israeli illegal settlers, such as attacks on Palestinian shepherds; actions that prevent them from cultivating their land; and damage to their agriculture products carried out from the nearby Israeli settlements. They also have to manage the threat of being evicted from their land.<sup>3</sup> Many of the traditional cultural practices which are directly linked to the land, such as agricultural and pastoral activities, are at risk of getting lost over the next generation.

The “On Our Land” research project has built on longstanding work by Darweish and Rigby (2015) who, over several years, have sought to document the everyday resistance of SHH communities against the Israeli occupation and the violence of the settlers. The project, which was therefore able to draw on existing relationships and trust, focused on intergenerational relationships in Bedouin and non-Bedouin communities in the oPt with the aim being to empower young people to explore and preserve their lived cultural heritage and its relationship to the land. The research consisted of three main components: 1) cultural heritage protection; 2) training and capacity-building; and 3) advocacy and education. The research involved collaboration between academic researchers in the UK, a Palestinian partner organisation, a Palestinian oral history expert, a Palestinian advocacy and education expert, a local programme coordinator, a local advisory group, and a technical advisory group.

Thirty youth researchers were recruited from SHH’s 30 villages, and the group was fairly equally divided in terms of gender and representation of the villages. The YRs learnt about oral history methodologies from a highly experienced Palestinian oral history trainer during a series of different workshops. With the trainer’s assistance they developed interview questions and a set of themes on which they wanted to focus their research. Each researcher

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<sup>3</sup> The term “settlements” refers to the Israeli settlement areas in Palestinian land, which are illegal according to international law. Israel applies domestic law to the majority of the settlements and their residents (B’Tselem, January 2019).

had their own particular set of interests in relation to different aspects of their heritage, and this enabled the group to conduct interviews on a variety of themes such as popular songs, living in caves, food, wedding traditions, agricultural practices, Palestinian embroidery, and the history of the place. During the research project, the youth researchers also participated in advocacy and education activities, such as hosting visits by Palestinian and international groups and diplomatic delegations in their villages and public speaking. Five YRs participated in a speaking tour in the UK in 2019 and early 2020, during which they presented their research findings and showed members of the UK public a film that was produced as part of the project. As part of the speaking tour, they presented the project to a range of audiences from university students and academics to members of the public and policy makers and shapers in the UK. The youth researchers attended several training sessions before the UK tour in order to enhance their public speaking skills. This training helped them to understand how to develop presentations, make convincing arguments, and showcase the research they had conducted in the most effective ways.

<Insert Picture 1 here>

A constant evaluative and reflexive process focused on the content and processes of the research was a key part of the project, and it provided an opportunity for reflection and learning during, as well as after, the primary research phase, which allowed for changes that had a particular impact on the involvement of women researchers and other stakeholders in SHH. For example, the female youth researchers noted that they did not feel confident about handling the camera and videography equipment after the initial photography training. This led to an additional training session which was specifically organised to help them to build their confidence in using cameras during the interviews. One of the youth researchers who was already an experienced photographer led this training, and this ensured an informal and collegial atmosphere. The female youth researchers also reflected on how gender might have

an impact on the interviews they were conducting and therefore what steps they needed to consider in the planning process. For example, one of the YRs, Amira Hureini, said: “I went to interview women and in most the cases they had low voices and didn’t allow us to photograph or record a video of their faces”.<sup>4</sup> The youth researchers also took into consideration expectations that the interviewed women would usually focus on emotional aspects and on details while men might focus on major themes. The youth researchers’ confidence in photography increased during the training, and one of them decided that she would like to participate in another photography course in the future. However, not everyone enjoyed photography to the same extent. “I don’t really know why I don’t like photographing so much, I can’t find an explanation”, Dahab Abu Sabha commented, adding that “It’s hard for me to coordinate so many small details and actions”.<sup>5</sup>

<Insert picture 2 here>

The full participation of the youth researchers and the wider community was at the heart of the “On Our Land” research project, which recognised and built on the experience, wisdom, and agency of the participants. As a team we recognised their knowledge of the local social political context and learned from it. Participatory methods were at the core of this research, and they extended not only to the methods but also to the overall principles of building partnership. The premise for the project design was developed in line with the ethos of conflict transformation (CT). We perceive CT as a holistic and multifaceted process that engages with conflict and transforms communities. It aims to reduce violence and bring about sustainable peace and justice in ways that are accountable to those directly affected by conflict. CT recognises and promotes the human and cultural resources that exist in a given

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ameera Hureini, 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2019, Al Tuwani, South Hebron Hills.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Dahab, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2019, Al Twani, South Hebron Hills.



context rather than seeing them as a problem, and it assumes that people within a situation, rather than outsiders, have the answers (Fisher & Abdi, 2000).

As part of the research, there were regular consultations with a local advisory group which consisted of the area's mayors, local social and political leaders, and other key stakeholders in the communities. Consultations were also conducted with an external technical advisory group, which consisted of oral historians, geographers, artists, and other experts.

The data for this chapter consists of 25 interviews conducted with the youth researchers during 2018-2019. In the interviews, they reflected on their experiences and provided feedback on what it was like to work on the project. The interviews focused on how the "On Our Land" project empowered the youth to exercise their agency to connect to their land and culture. The interview material was supplemented by secondary data in the form of evaluation reports and observation notes that had been created by staff members during their visits to SHH, and so we were able to draw on staff reflections as well as those of the youth researchers.

### **A participatory video approach**

Participatory video (PV) methodology is a concept that encompasses many definitions, although typically the use of video as a methodology builds on different practices that are used to address community needs or social issues (Mitchell et al., 2012). Milne (2016) defines participatory video as "the use of filmic practices to engage and co-produce a conversation/research with people according to their interest and potential" (p.402).

Participatory video processes usually involve a group of participants who are primarily responsible for creating their own videos with minimal assistance from the research team (Mitchell & de Lange, 2011). Utilising this kind of video production approach as a group, participants can design the process from the beginning to end, and they can offer participants

access to significant socially constructed knowledge that can help to address topics which are often not spoken about (Mitchell & de Lange, 2011).

This means that the study should be grounded in feminist/emancipatory epistemologies and be participatory in nature, as well as critically reflexive (Milne, 2016). Milne also points out that, if the participants so wish, participatory video can be used as means to advocate for social change (Milne, 2016). In PV, the participants themselves decide on the direction they want to take with their videos, and this shapes how PV can be utilised by communities to express concern and highlight issues to present to policymakers. As Dudley (2003) argues, using PV in this way allows participants to bring injustices to light in new arenas and challenge power relations, and so video can be a powerful way to achieve social transformation. Due to the PV process, which is characterised by collaboration and reflection on the process itself followed by action, PV can also be situated as a tool within the methodological framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Plush, 2012; Walsh, 2016).

Participatory video is a relatively new method, and so accounts about its use have often been celebratory and uncritical as Milne (2016) notes. As attractive as PV sounds because of its potential to enable people to be empowered in their communities, Shaw (2016) urges us to pay attention to the real-life issues involved in conducting such research and the ethical obligation to acknowledge the “messy reality of practice” and interrogate the power dynamics of the process. Additionally, as Walsh (2016) notes, we often delude ourselves by assuming that it is only a “lack of confidence” which is at the root of any problems that obstruct the potential of PV. Walsh argues that it is a dangerous denial of reality to think that justice can be served simply by telling stories of injustice. Larger structural inequalities will not be solved just through employing PV as a method (Walsh, 2016).

We must also question how participatory the PV process can be. For example, as Shaw (2016) outlines in her research, academic researchers are usually given funding by external agencies to conduct their studies and use particular methods. The receipt of funding means that researchers are committed to creating certain outputs, such as videos, based on a pre-defined methodology (Milne, 2012). This explicit requirement “often constrains richer process possibilities” (Shaw, 2016, p. 420), can create tensions in the project, and can also diminish the process of PV when there are multiple actors involved who are taking part due to different motivations (Mistry et al., 2016). Marginalised communities are also often represented as the beneficiaries of PV-based research, but they are very rarely the ones who have initiated the process or taken part in designing the research or writing the funding application (Mistry et al., 2016).

At the core of the research process of the “On Our Land” project was the aim to create a participatory method so that youth researchers would be the actors driving the research. The combination of PV with an oral history methodology allowed the youth researchers to combine a scholarly approach with activist enterprise for the purposes of creating social change (Armitage & Gluck, 1998). The project utilised oral history methodology to amplify the voices of the dispossessed and displaced, as has been demonstrated in *Voices from Chernobyl* (Aleksievich et al., 2019). The use of oral history together with the participatory video method was used to enable the youth researchers to create a cultural heritage archive of the area and people. Due to the occupation, Palestinians do not have their own recorded and documented history archive, and therefore it was an important element of the project, not only to record the history of the place and space, but also to utilise video to record cultural heritage elements such as landscape, types of living accommodation, traditional embroidery, Palestinian dress, and agricultural tools.

The youth researchers worked in pairs: one would film with a video camera and the other person would conduct the interview with the participant. The use of PV allowed the YRs to ask the participants to showcase important elements of their cultural heritage practices, such as how to make traditional cheese or use traditional agricultural tools for harvesting. It also allowed the research participants to demonstrate elements of their cultural heritage that they wanted to show. For example, one of the video interviews was about how to make bread in the *taboun* (traditional clay bread oven), and the youth discussed with the interviewee the process of breadmaking and the way the *taboun* had been made. For the majority of the research participants, this was the first time they had been asked about their own cultural heritage and they were happy to talk and share their heritage with the youth researchers. The youth researchers had developed certain questions and themes beforehand, but they also allowed the space for participants to reflect and expand on their experiences and the significance of their culture and heritage.

Through regular evaluation and monitoring processes, the aim was to make the academic researchers, as well as the youth researchers, reflect on the PV process and provide feedback on how the project and research were delivered. They were asked to reflect on the power dynamics and relationships between the different stakeholders in the project and use this reflection process as an opportunity to modify and make changes to the project. As Walsh (2014) points out, a reflexive approach to power and agency is essential in order for the PV method to be able to produce any kind of change.

This paper draws on literature on the Palestinian concept of *Sumud* and the oral history participatory video approach to show how this method became an empowering force that allowed young Palestinian researchers to express resilience and resistance, celebrate their persistent presence on the land, and undermine oppressive power structures. It also reflects on how the problems involved in PV-based research had an impact on the project.

## **Sumud as a form of resistance**

We developed an original, conceptual, typological framework of *Sumud* (“resilience” in Arabic), based on resistance and resilience literature and data from the interviews and reports to present the research findings. The framework enabled us to analyse how participatory video methodology and an oral history approach enhanced the agency of the youth researchers and the communities in SHH, allowing them to stay connected to their land and challenge the asymmetry of power between the occupied and the occupier. The framework also highlighted the forces that undermined the agency of the youth researchers and the community because of the intervention of the Coventry University team.

Significant portions of the existing academic research about the Palestinians in the oPt focus on the mechanism of control and the direct and structural violence of the occupation. Other parts of the literature pay attention to open resistance and particularly violence. There is a risk that this type of analysis might unintentionally undermine the visibility of the Palestinians’ everyday resistance whereby people contest prevailing power relations without resorting to open confrontation with the occupation power. In this kind of circumstance, the daily life of occupied people can enact co-existence, resilience, and resistance simultaneously, or people can be considered simultaneously both as subservient and active agents (Semelin, 1993). In fact, some argue that non-cooperation with the different dimensions of power imposed by the Israeli occupation can be seen as a challenge to that power and in line with the principles of nonviolent resistance (Sellick, 2019; Scott, 1987)

This research examines how the use of a participatory video approach to record oral history contributed to agency and *Sumud* for SHH youth in ways that allowed them to stay connected to their land and cultural heritage. PV enabled youth to come together and work as a group interested in social change and learning about their history and culture. They learned skills

which allowed them to combine PV and an oral history approach to document the history of SHH. The youth planned and acted as a group, and this strengthened their agency and connection to the land, enabling them to celebrate their culture and be proud of it. *Sumud*, has been described as an “umbrella concept with different shades of meaning, different emphases over time, and also somewhat different understandings related to place and context” (Van Teeffelen, 2018, p 8). The term refers to inner strength and was born out of people’s everyday need to survive and persist in the face of ongoing Israeli occupation efforts to displace Palestinians. It emerged as a constructive concept among Palestinians in the refugee camps in the late 1960s and it became popular in the 70s and 80s among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. It has become fundamental to the protection of and adherence to Palestinian culture, identity, history, and the values of the community (Soliman, 2019; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2015; Darweish and Rigby, 2015). *Sumud* was perceived by many in the early years of the occupation as a survival and coping mechanism that allowed people to maintain a sense of normality and stay on the land despite the hardship of the occupation, but for some it was understood as a form of passive resilience (Richter-Devroe, 2011). *Sumud* can be understood as a strategy aimed at developing self-sufficiency that encompasses work to cultivate the land in the face of illegal land confiscation, eviction, and settlement-building. However, others argue that *Sumud* represents acts involved in the everyday tactics of resistance, particularly because it became prominent during the first Intifada in 1987 and was employed to describe proactive and constructive resistance (Soliman, 2019; Rigby, 2015).

This paper draws on literature about Palestinian *Sumud* to analyse the role played by the youth researchers in SHH and assess how an approach based on oral history and participatory video can become a powerful means to express resilience and to undermine oppressive power structures (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2009, p. 142; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). The Israeli occupation forces exerted their hegemony over the Palestinians in a bid to compel

submission, obedience, and control of land and the people. This paper argues that *Sumud*, combined with the particular methodology of oral history and participatory video, provides a range of tactics that people can use to resist the occupation and hold onto their Palestinian land and culture.

The use of PV demonstrated the power of the visual image to present the experience and rich cultural heritage of SHH communities. Youth were able to showcase aspects of their own intangible cultural heritage, from weaving carpets, to cheese-making and breadmaking, life in caves, and traditional songs and celebrations. While they were able to show the survival of these cultural practices, they also told the story of how these communities struggle against efforts by the Israeli occupation to expel them from their land. This set of contrasts allowed audiences to learn about the way of life in SHH in encounters which promoted emotional connection. For example, they could watch the sheep grazing the arid landscape and listen to the shepherd talking about different plants and, in the process, engage with the landscape and the connection that Palestinian people have to their land and traditional knowledge and practices. The recording of SHH history will make a significant contribution to the documentation of Palestinian history and culture and make it much more widely available to the community and public at large.

This chapter will employ the following *Sumud* typology as a framework. As we mentioned earlier, we developed this typology based on our interviews and secondary data analyses and coding. The typology was developed to present the findings of our research and analysis for this article is as follows:

- **Stay on the land:** Persist in Palestine and continue to live on your land and cultivate it despite the threats of eviction and house demolition. Continue to live your life, have a family, and build a house.

- **Build relationships:** Preserve and build social relationships in Palestinian communities. Foster inclusion and cohesion in Palestinian society, as well as mutual support and solidarity.
- **Celebrate life:** Celebrate and enjoy life despite and because of the suffering that arises from the oppression of the occupation. Do not let the occupier kill the joy of life and the beauty of Palestine. Be proud of your identity, celebrate your culture, and live your life in dignity.
- **Stand up and tell the whole world:** Increase the sense of agency and power among youth so that they can be resilient, speak out, and share their stories with the world.
- **Identify hindering forces:** Tackle the forces and dynamics that undermine youth researchers and leaders in their work to challenge the unjust relationship between the occupied and occupier.

### **Research findings and analysis**

In this section, we present our research findings based on the original evaluation data. We analyse how the use of participatory video methods to record oral history contributed to the agency of the youth researchers, and we identify the forces and the dynamics that hindered the development and exercise of this agency.

The young “On Our Land” researchers were able to learn about their history and cultural heritage through the process of conducting interviews with people from older generations and documenting stories about life before and after the Israeli occupation in 1967. They were exposed to stories about their families’ way of life as part of a pastoralist community and their families’ struggle to stay on their land against the will of different occupying powers.



## **Staying on the land**

Land is at the heart of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and a central plank of Israel's ideology is to expel Palestinians and confiscate their land. Therefore the endurance of the Palestinians who work their land and live on it despite the direct and structural violence of the occupation is evidence of their Sumud and resilience (Pappé, 2012). The data shows how exposure to their elders' stories about staying on the land has augmented the young researchers' connection with, and appreciation of, their history and their connection to the land. Ali Awad, one of the youth researchers, reflected on his experience of conducting the interviews: "This has led [to] us growing more attachment to our land and it increased our belief in our right over this land".<sup>6</sup> This type of conviction inspired the youth to see the value of their land and go with their families to cultivate it, despite the harassment and violence they faced from the Israeli army and the settlers. Youth become aware of the systemic policies of the occupation which sought to displace Palestinians, and this motivated and mobilised the youth to work their land and encourage others to do the same.

Most of the attention of SHH residents is focused on exposing the violations that the occupation imposes on the life of their Palestinian communities and the mechanisms of control and restrictions imposed on them. However, the oral history project provided them with an opportunity to expand their perspective and encouraged the youth to look beyond the current context and explore the different layers of the history and cultural heritage of their communities. Ahmad Abu Jondya argued that "I got to know more about our heritage through several interviews, I see now that when you tie heritage with the implications of occupation on our daily lives, the message is stronger and you present an overview picture. You tie the past with the present, and so your message is stronger."<sup>7</sup> The ability of youth to

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Ali Awad, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, SHH.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ahmad Abu Jondya, 29<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, SHH.

learn from their history and cultural heritage, as narrated by older generations, has consolidated intergenerational continuity and appreciation of the land and what it means to all generations. It has also increased youths' attachment to the land and the cultural heritage of their community, consolidating their identity as youth from SHH who are proud of their way of life, and this has ultimately strengthened their relationship to the land and their place. They have learnt how older generations managed to maintain a balanced semi-nomadic way of life and carry out basic cultivation and herding in ways that intertwined their identity with the land. The youth researchers argue that they are writing the history of their community and documenting the rich cultural heritage of the villages in SHH, learning from it and handing it down to the next generation in ways that recognise its value. They call this cultural heritage their "treasure", and it is clear that they recognise the documentation of their stories and the transfer of knowledge between generations as critical "under the Israeli occupation which tries to diminish these areas. It assures us of our right to this land and our presence on it and it tells a story of what resources we had and what we achieved".<sup>8</sup>

Most of the Palestinian land in SHH was confiscated by the Israeli occupation or declared to be part of a designated closed military firing zone, which prevents Palestinians from cultivating it or using it for animal grazing. Israel also controls water resources, and so most of the villages have no running water or access to water in the wells on their land.

Palestinians in SHH have to buy water and transport it in tanks to their villages. Infrastructure development is prevented, while the building and expansion of Israeli settlements continues in the area. This ethnic cleansing policy has caused stark economic hardship and it has also forced Palestinians to take up work as cheap labour inside Israel or in the illegal Israeli settlements (B'Tselem, 2005 and 2020). These pressures have created distance between older people in SHH communities and younger generations who have had to leave behind their

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ali Awad, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, SHH.

communities and their traditional ways of life, including their pastoral and agricultural practices. By contrast, the oral history research conducted by the youth, which brought them back into contact with older people and their communities, reconnected them to the land and their cultural heritage. As one of the interviewees commented: “I would see certain tools related to agriculture and herding at my father or grandfather’s home which they would use in their daily lives, and I used to not care too much before; however, through the oral history interviews I conducted with my grandfather and others, I now have an interest. [It] brought me closer to the land”.<sup>9</sup>

As the data demonstrates, the exposure of youth to participatory video research techniques strengthened their connection to their cultural heritage and nourished intergenerational exchange and learning. It increased their sense of belonging to the land and identity, and it also gave them confidence and the persistence to stay on their land and cultivate it despite the threat of eviction and house demolition. They have an increased sense of pride in who they are, and they are continuing to live and build their lives in SHH. Dahab shared how the research has “made me believe in myself and helped me learn about my own culture and history, it was impressive for me to learn how my grandmothers were having tough lives and managed to keep our heritage”.<sup>10</sup>

The use of PV techniques encouraged youth to travel to different villages to conduct interviews, and it also helped them to become aware of the area and the characteristics and history of each village. Conducting PV interviews enabled youth to develop media skills and understand the process of conducting interviews, and the experience also sparked their curiosity and interest in learning more about the history and story of the place and the people. Interviewees were eager to tell their stories, and the youth were thirsty and curious to learn

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Ali Awad, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, SHH.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Dahab 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2019, SHH.

about their cultural heritage. PV also proved to be a very effective technique for sharing the visual aspects of Palestinian cultural heritage, because it was possible to show women weaving carpets and making food, people engaging in traditional singing, and families cultivating and harvesting their crops.

The youth researchers interviewed SHH people from older generations about pastoral and agricultural practices; herding and grazing; craft, food and traditional songs which celebrated their cultural heritage; and about the history of the place and community. The interviewees narrated the story of their struggle against the occupation and their determination to survive and stay on their land. During oral history interviews, the youth researchers listened to stories about the experiences had by their parents and grandparents and recorded accounts from them about major events that had impacted on their lives. The older generations recounted their experiences of displacement and struggle against the British and Israeli occupation. As one of the YRs noted:

I had a different experience and understanding of history when I heard it from someone who lived it. It was different from what we learned in school. For example, reading about the 1936 Arab revolt in Palestine differs from listening to someone who experienced it in my area. It tells you about people whose names and stories aren't documented as part of history but now I put them on the map.<sup>11</sup>

This exchange strengthened the social relations and cohesion between generations and provided an opportunity to document the stories of older people. As one of the young researchers noted, "When you speak to an older man or woman in your area and they tell you a story you never heard before, for me that was an amazing feeling".<sup>12</sup> The youth researchers expressed pride that they had conducted this research and learnt from older people about the

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Kawthar Nawaja, 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2019, SHH.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with youth researcher, 10<sup>th</sup> August. 2018, SHH.

history of their community, and they appreciated the wisdom and knowledge they encountered which they were not aware of before they conducted their research.

### **Relationship-building**

The youth researchers involved in the “On Our Land” project came from 30 small villages and hamlets in the large geographic area covered by South Hebron Hills. Connections between the localities are difficult to make. There are no paved roads and there is a general lack of basic infrastructure, such as water, electricity, or other services. The youth researchers worked together over the period of a year and attended several events and workshops together. They organised the interviews and travelled in teams to different hamlets and villages to meet interviewees. They learned together, shared experiences, and reflected on their research. In the project’s closing ceremony – which was attended by the youth, interviewees, and social and political leaders from the community – the mayor of Al Twani, Mohamed Al Rabaa’I, declared: “I appreciate very much how the relationship between the youth researchers developed. They did not know about each other before. They did not know that some of these villages and hamlets actually exists. Today we have [a] very strong and informed group. They connected SHH together”.<sup>13</sup> Working together fostered inclusion and cohesion in the Palestinian communities in SHH and it facilitated mutual support and solidarity. The youth researchers repeatedly underlined the ways in which their relationships with elderly members of their communities had positively changed.

### **Celebrating life**

Youth researchers’ experience of working together ignited feelings of joy and promoted the celebration of life despite the oppression of the occupation. It also encouraged recognition of the beauty and richness of South Hebron Hills. As one of the youth reflected, “Ever since I

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<sup>13</sup> Closing ceremony, Mohamed Al Rabaa’I, mayor of Al Twani, 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2019, SHH.

got involved in this research, my love for this land has increased and I also learned so many things I didn't know before about SHH".<sup>14</sup> During the interviews, youth learned about Palestinian cultural heritage in SHH and the older people's way of life as farmers and as herders. They interviewed men and women about herding, but also about traditional songs and celebrations related to the land, as well as weddings and other social occasions. The insights and experience they had gained became apparent to one of the researchers: "I'm so proud that I had the opportunity to talk about my village (Wadi Rakheym) which so many people do not know about and to talk about the lives of the people living there. This gives me so much pride. I raise my head up when I talk about my village and about my people and my family. I put my village on the map".<sup>15</sup> As the interviews with the youth researchers show, they came to appreciate the treasures within their community and gained the resilience needed to maintain this way of life in harsh conditions.

Feelings of celebration and pride in the achievements of the youth researchers were expressed during the closing ceremony, where Marwan Darweish – one of the academic research team members – noted that "This is a great celebration to see the YR, narrators, and the families of the graduates. It is time to celebrate such an achievement. The YR become an important source of energy in the community and connection to the older generation".<sup>16</sup> The community celebration of the youth researchers' accomplishments was mixed with feelings of dignity and pride that arose from seeing how the youth researchers and older generations came together.

### **Stand up and tell the whole world**

The youth researchers reflected that the experience of participation in the research project increased their sense of agency and resilience so that they felt empowered to speak out. They

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Makhamra, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2019, SHH.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Hamdan Mudalal, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2019, Al Twani, SHH.

<sup>16</sup> Closing ceremony, Marwan Darweish, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019, SHH.

learned skills and strategies that enabled them to present and speak to the public in the UK about the situation in SHH. They learned to be clear about their message and stay focused on the situation in SHH or, as our colleagues put it, “stay setting on your rock and keep holding” to prevent any distraction or diversion from the main idea. The youth also had a safe space and time to reflect on their presentation during the speaking tour and learn from this process. The youth presented their research about the cultural heritage of SHH to education institutions, Bedouin communities, and international and local civil society organisations active in the oPt. As one of the youth commented: “I learned how to research my own village and to place it on the map, and to ensure its existence and to tell the whole world that there are people living in this area, and that there are people living here and they deserve to live in dignity”.<sup>17</sup> They became curious about researching their cultural heritage and history and communicating it to the outside world.

The Israeli occupation imposes restrictions on Palestinians’ movements and their ability to travel within and outside the oPt. The youth researchers were invited to an art festival in East Jerusalem to exhibit their work in the British Council’s building in June 2019; however they were not able to travel from SHH to Jerusalem without an Israeli permit. A group of 12 youths applied for a permit from the Israeli Civil Administration in the oPt to travel and participate in the festival, but, as one of the youths noted, “We submitted the applications and paid a fee but none of us were able to travel. They rejected all our applications. The occupation don’t want us to show to the world our research about our cultural heritage”.<sup>18</sup> Despite this obstruction, the youth researchers sent photos and short films to be exhibited as part of the festival. They wanted their voices and experiences to be heard and to tell the participants in the festival about their situation and Sumud. Similarly, when the youth

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Hamdan Mudalal, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2019, SHH.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Fatima Nawaja, 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2019, SHH.

researchers were prevented from travelling to the Naqab to meet the Palestinian Bedouin community in Israel and present their research about their history and cultural heritage, a group of Palestinian women from Al-Naqab visited SHH and met the youth group to discuss the issues and challenges that they face and exchange experiences. A similar visit was conducted by a Palestinian youth group from Israel whose members came to visit SHH.

While SHH is marginalised by the Israeli occupation and ignored by the Palestinian Authority, the villages of Suysia and Al Twani attract the attention of international human rights and solidarity groups including Israeli groups. Staff from development-focused, humanitarian organisations and foreign diplomatic missions in the oPt regularly visit SHH to learn about the situation this community is facing. (Soliman 2019 and Darweish and Rigby 2015). One of the youth researchers commented that “people living in these places do not have their rights and so they are visited by many foreigners. The residents in these areas are focused on presenting life under occupation to visitors; however I learned about our heritage through the interviews. I see that when you tie heritage with the implications of occupation on our daily lives, the message is stronger and you present an overview picture”.<sup>19</sup>

The YR travelled to Jordan and the UK to conduct a speaking tour to present their intergenerational research about their cultural heritage and the impact of the occupation on their lives. They met different groups and organisations to tell them the story of their community. One of the researchers described their experience as follows: “I learned how to scope my own village and to place it on the map and to ensure its existence and to tell the whole world that there are people living in this area and that there are people living here and they deserve to live in dignity”.<sup>20</sup> This experience enhanced the youth researchers’ confidence and their sense that they had the power to speak out.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Ahmad Abu Jondya, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2019, SHH.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Hamdan Mudalal, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2019, SHH.



The youth researchers believe that it is their right to document their heritage and history. As one of the youths asserted, “We are researchers for our community and document our ancestors and their lives here in this village before the occupation and to prove that the occupation does not have the right to be here – and in fact they want to displace us”.<sup>21</sup> The youth felt that they had gained the power and opportunity to show the whole world that this generation is capable of mobilising for change and are “proud of who they are and what they doing”.<sup>22</sup>

### **Hindering forces**

Despite the increased sense of agency and connection to the land demonstrated by the youth researchers in their interviews, the research process encountered several challenges and hindering forces during the project’s three-year period. In fact, the intervention of the project in SHH undermined community resilience in some ways and generated competition and division among local activists and organisations. As one of the staff members from Coventry University observed, “I started to get phone calls from different local leaders complaining that we ignored them and [were] only working with one side”.<sup>23</sup> Such criticism made us aware of the potential harm that we might cause and the need for organisers of participatory video projects to consult with all local activists and try to include them in planning and activities.

The competing motivations and interests of the different participants created challenges in relation to budget, timelines, and the creation of outputs. For example, even though the aim was to involve and make decisions together with the youth researchers, the tight timelines

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<sup>21</sup> Anonymous person from Tuba, 20 July 2018, SHH .

<sup>22</sup> Comment made by an observer from the audience attending the screening of the film in central Birmingham, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Observation by staff, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2018.

and outside pressures for project deliverables sometimes made this impossible. Shaw (2016) rightly questions how participatory a process can actually be when outside influence is involved, and this issue certainly arose during this research project. Many times, we had to negotiate between competing demands to keep the project participatory and to deliver outputs we had agreed with the funder and/or our own institution.

The research exposed the potentially incompatible and competing goals of the outsiders and the insiders who participated in this project. As outsiders, we aimed to reach 50% gender balance in the research and in the membership of the group which travelled to the UK for the speaking tour in 2019/20. The youth researchers and the team developed a set of selection criteria to decide who would travel to the UK and consulted the families of the youths. This consultation was carried out with particular care for the female members of the group, and the Coventry University team and the local programme coordinator visited them in their homes to explain about the aims of the tour and the arrangements for the delegation to travel. We included the local leaders in these visits and some youth too. We faced considerable challenges to get the support of the family of the female candidate to travel to the UK and find the balance between the needs of the family and the project management team. On reflection, the leverage exercised by the project management team (mostly outsiders) caused unnecessary harm to the relationships within the family and the community, and the process was exploited through interference by certain disruptive parties in SHH, which caused further division. This dynamic undermined the ability of the youth researchers and the local leader to work together and challenge the unjust occupation because it caused fragmentation within the community and diverted energy away from the project's aims.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that participatory research methods can be a significant catalyst for increased feelings of agency and power that can help to undermine oppressive power structures and contribute to social justice and peace. Meanwhile, the challenges we encountered and the mistakes that occurred in the research process confirmed earlier research findings which encourage a measured approach to the potential of video-based participatory action research. While it is beyond the power of PV to change structural inequalities, the work carried out by youth researchers in SHH demonstrates how PV can be used to create a model for potential change. It enabled the youth in SHH, as an oppressed group, to stay on their land and appreciate the value of and their connection to the land; it fostered inclusion and cohesion in their community; and it encouraged them to celebrate life despite and because of the occupation, and speak out to expose the effects of their oppression. These are critical steps to undermining the power of the occupier and the occupation as a structure, in and beyond SHH.

We conclude that the participatory nature of the project, which utilised PV and strengthened the youth researchers' responsibility for their own cultural heritage, has created a sense of pride and ownership for the youth in these communities. It has also given these communities the tools and skills to continue to resist the occupation of their land, a fact reflected in the sustained use of the skills the project cultivated beyond its end date. Although the project itself was finished by December 2019, we have kept in contact with the youth researchers who took the lead and continued to meet with each other and went on to conduct further interviews with members of their communities. Fatima, one of the youth researchers who did not finish high school, managed to return to study and pass the high school matriculation exams and has been accepted to study oral history at Bir Zeit University in the oPt: this is just one illustration of the agency that the youth researchers developed through the PV process.

We argue that the PV method could be replicated and generalised to other contexts to achieve social and political change and enable the creation of similar opportunities for the transformation of power asymmetry. Ahmad Abu Jondya, one of the youth researchers, summarised PV's power eloquently: "When you document the history of your area or country, or anything you are researching, you are passing on the truth about a certain matter and it diminishes the Israeli story or any other story. It assures us of our right to this land and our presence on it, and it tells a story of what resources we had and what we achieved".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Ahmad Abu Jondya, 29<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, Al Twani, South Hebron Hills.

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