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Urban Living Labs for the development of hybrid research methods in contextualized societal challenges; the example of Cultural Probes in poverty research in the Netherlands.

Abstract

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Abstract

Poverty is a persistent and insufficiently understood societal challenge that requires the inclusion of lived experiences of poverty (Hagenaars, 1986; Reeves et al., 2020). Traditional approaches to poverty are dominated by the non-poor’s understanding of poverty, which hinders effective policy and intervention strategies. To address this gap, we demonstrate that Urban Living Labs (ULLs) provide the potential for the development of hybrid research methods, i.e., the Cultural Probe methodology. We argue that this method is able to explore the lived experiences of poverty, and shed light on how people perceive poverty, themselves and others in their local context. We apply the method via the social-cultural perspective, going beyond the traditional economic perspective on poverty (Lok-Dessallien, 1999). We aim to explore the usefulness and feasibility of the methodology in local context, particularly in terms of participants’ ability and willingness to share their poverty experiences and complete the probe booklet.

Key words

Urban Living Labs, Cultural Probe, Poverty, Hybrid Research Methods, Societal Challenges.



Methods and Approach used

Cultural probes are a - research through design - participatory research method to gather information about people's habits, routines and values. It allows researchers to understand the lived experiences of people in more depth via research in which participants themselves have control over the data delivery.

We have been developing the Cultural Probe method since September 2022 in collaboration with the ELSA Lab for Poverty and Debts in the Netherlands as well as experts working in the field of poverty and cross-cultural communication. In practice, the Cultural Probe is a booklet assignment that is integrated in the Dutch language classes of participants, i.e., cross-border migrants, of the language café to explore poverty via the social-cultural lens. The language cafés are free classes hosted by the library and volunteers. The Cultural Probe booklet is given to participants to complete individually over a period of 2-3 weeks, after which they will come together with the researchers and training lead to discuss their experiences and perspectives on poverty.

The research focus is on cross-border migrant groups who are in the process of social integration programs in South-Limburg region since this groups has a rich cultural diversity that will give better insights towards the experience of poverty. We need to make nuances here, because there is an ambivalent assumption that this target group is part of poverty clusters in the region according to formal registers of the language café. We aim to investigate if this assumption is true and how people position themselves within this assumption via their own personal experiences.

Results and Outcomes

Upon conducting the study, the language levels of the participants differed greatly from our expectations. Because of this, it has been decided to change the set-up of the two sessions: during the first session, all fourteen participants are split into three groups, depending on their level of language. Together with two researchers and three language teachers, the participants were helped in filling out the Cultural Probes.

Upon the second visit, two weeks later, participants were asked follow-up questions to common themes that arose in the findings. It must be noted here that the group



composition is slightly different from the first session.

A total of fourteen participants have filled out the Cultural Probes. These findings have been thematically analyzed. From the filled out forms, nine aspects have been identified. Important to note is that a majority of the participants are currently living in Dutch asylum centers. This means they do not have housing, nor do they pay for housing or electricity. They receive 65 EUR per week per person for food and clothing. Children receive about half of this amount and this money is given to the caretakers. Some participants have only been living in the Netherlands for one month, whereas others live here for multiple years already.

In the thematic clustering, the areas of focus are the experiences of their day to day lives, their social circle and integration, and their association with aspects such as money, friendship, and the municipality.

Day to day Life experiences

Participants were asked to draw a cartoon of yesterday and explain what activities they did. Most of the activities that they undertook were 'for free', such as walking, reading, or watching television. One participant explained that he often walked to the city center. He was not able to purchase items, but he liked being among the fellow Dutch. He was eager to learn the Dutch language, but the asylum center prohibited him as he was always in a bubble of cross-border migrants unable to speak Dutch yet on a daily basis.

Some participants claimed doing more expensive activities, such as going to an indoor ski hall or to the swimming classes for their children. However, it is questioned whether these participants had been honest, or gave wished-for answers. To illustrate our doubt here, it was asked in the Cultural Probe to point out on a city map where they undertook their activities. The participant from the indoor ski hall (in the region there is only one known option) did point towards something else on the map. So, our checks and balances in the Cultural Probe did not always congruent.

Social Circle and Integration

The social circle of the participants is highly linked to their country of origin. This is to no surprise as the participants have only lived in the Netherlands for a limited amount of time. It is noted that all participants have the most contact with their parents, partner, or



children rather than their friends. Many participants have had a long journey before coming to the Netherlands, which is also showcased in the geographical dispersion of the people they are in touch with. One participant's son lives in Sweden, his wife in Syria, and he lives in the Netherlands. Talking about this topic was also emotional to the participants. Furthermore, similarities in their journey have brought people together. People who have made friends in the Netherlands, tended to make friends with other refugees who they could share their experiences with.

Association with certain terms

One assignment in the Cultural Probe revolved around association techniques on various topics, such as friendship, the municipality, or money. One interesting similarity is found between the topic of friendship and family. To many participants this seemed interchangeable. Furthermore, on the topic of health both mental and physical health is addressed. Health is also considered a more important factor in their life than money, even though money is scarce to the participants at the time of the study. Despite thinking about money often, health is associated with freedom.

Presentation interest

ULLs are able to learn collectively about cities (Blezer and Abujidi, 2021; Puerari et al., 2018), yet it remains unclear how they can facilitate sustainability challenges on local level (Marvin et al., 2018), such as poverty. Recently, the role of ULLs is recognized to prepare students, researchers, and stakeholders to tackle local societal challenges transdisciplinary, co-creatively and in line with the SDGs in context (Verhoef et al., 2019; Van den Heuvel, 2021; Blezer, Abujidi and Sap, 2022).

The Cultural Probe is a hybrid research method in that it is able to bridge communication and understanding between 'types of stakeholders' in ULLs, in this case poor and non-poor people. Consequently, it 1) enhances understanding of a local societal challenge in context from those experiencing it, 2) criticizes traditional research methods in that they remain limited by being designed through thinking from one stakeholder needs, and also 3) facilitates the co-creation and social learning process in ULLs for students, researchers, citizens and practitioners to acquire skills needed to overcome sustainability transitions on local scale (see e.g. Stern, 2014).



We believe the Cultural Probe methodology can also redefine prejudices and assumptions that define poverty in formal institutions, municipalities, and social integration organisations. Consequently, enhance effective policy and intervention strategies by drawing upon the exploration of lived experiences of poverty, and shed light on how people perceive poverty, themselves, and others in their local context.

Discussion and dissemination

We aim to spark interest in our methodology and start dialogue with the public about the importance of ULLs for two points:

1. To what extent ULLs can improve traditional research methods to enhance research effectiveness for informing policies and programs to tackle societal challenges. Particularly, by incorporating the perspectives of those who experience that societal challenge, i.e., poverty in this innovation presentation.
2. The role of ULLs in examining ‘individualized yet collective societal challenges’, like poverty. By the use of ULLs, we can develop more comprehensive solutions to address institutional causes of societal challenges (see e.g., Bluemink et al., 2023 for poverty) next to existing solutions merely focusing on individual behavior.

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