Breaking the chains. Ethnographic film-making in mental health

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A few years ago I took a break from my position as a researcher at the Global and Cultural Mental Health Unit at the University of Melbourne to pursue further studies in visual anthropology. I wanted to develop my skills in using photography and film—two tools I am passionate about—as research instruments in my fields of interest, cultural psychiatry and global mental health. Harry Minas, the Unit director, had collaborated for several years with the Indonesian Ministry of Health; thanks to this support I was, albeit with a few hurdles, given access to research (by means of ethnographic film-documentary) an issue I felt strongly about: the violations of human rights of people with mental illness. After receiving ethics approval and technical support from the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology where I was then based, I embarked in a journey to West Java, Indonesia, to make a 64 min ethnographic documentary, *Breaking the chains*. [SIDEBAR LINK: For the Breaking the Chains film, see http://movie-ment.org/breakingthechains]

> **Comment [EC1]:** Online version: insert link plus trailer https://vimeo.com/146913142

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Breaking the Chains explores an illegal practice known as *pasung* in Indonesia—the use of physical restraint and confinement of people with mental illness. This kind of practices are also common in other low and middle income countries, and almost universally ignored. The Indonesian government has committed to the elimination of pasung across the country by 2017 (originally it was 2014) through a program called *Indonesia Bebas Pasung* (Indonesia free from pasung). This initiative by the Indonesian Ministry of Health followed the more localized program *Aceh Bebas Pasung*, which was initiated by the Governor of Aceh in 2010. *Breaking the chains* looks at the cultural meanings and functions of pasung and follows the activities carried out by a group of people known as *Komunitas Sehat Jiwa* (KSJ, which translates to "Community for people with mental illness") based in Cianjur. I was interested in this community organization in particular because it is lead and run by people with lived experience of mental health issues. In *Breaking the chains*, among others, the viewers follow the stories of Yayah, a woman who had been chained for 17 years and Asep Abdul, a young boy who was chained after he went missing for years. The film also takes the audience through a journey to remote parts of Java, where the charismatic leader Nurhamid and his helpers go looking in the jungle for a caged man and for Hadad, who was previously buried up to his neck into the ground for 12 years.

Breaking the chains is the first of a series of documentaries, photography and collaborative arts project I started with the intention of researching and engaging academic and non-academic audiences, by means of visual methods, on the issue of human rights violations that afflicts people with mental health problems in every society, including in the 'developed' world. [SIDEBAR LINK: For an article co-authored with a young man who was chained and uses narrative and visual art to share his story, see http://www.wcprr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015.03-04.149-1671.pdf]

I faced many issues in making this film, particularly in joining academic rigour with the production of a dramatically satisfying piece of work, and maintaining my own identity as a compassionate psychologist while keeping the impartiality required of an observational documentary-maker.

A question I had to deal with right at the start was about how to represent myself: to my own eyes, to the eyes of my collaborators, and to the eyes of the people they gave me access to. Was I Erminia the psychologist? Erminia the scholar in cultural and global mental health? Erminia the visual anthropologist/film-maker? What are the implications of being introduced as "Dr Colucci" instead of just "Erminia" or "my friend", as the volunteers call me in the film?

My multiple positions were also reflected in the way I was presented and represented to the families and communities I was filming. In one instance, when trying to convince the family of Hadad that the medicines would be helpful, Fery says: "She is also a doctor, from Australia". In the scene after Yayah is freed, Nurhamid includes me in his argument about how KSJ cared about her and her family.

[INSERT VIDEO HERE: Nurhamid's conversation with Yayah's father]

Nurhamid's conversation with Yayah's father

The multiplicity of roles I juggled during the filmmaking process was also reflected in the way the community related to me. At one point, I found myself providing suggestions to a young woman who intended to pursue an academic career; another time, in a small village in South Cianjur, I was asked to provide consultation to an elderly woman who had an undiagnosed health condition.

Furthermore, there was the issue of how I represented myself to myself. Although in some instances, I provided some suggestions about a particular situation, I felt I could focus on my role as the person researching and documenting, and leave someone else—more experienced in fact—to deal with the actual issue. This does not mean I was, as Christopher Isherwood would put it, "a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking." I developed a strong

connection with the people I was filming; I ultimately cared about them much more than I did about the film. It was extremely troubling to see the conditions in which many of these people lived and feel the pain their carers were feeling too. But I felt some relief at the thought that KSJ volunteers had taken these people under their care, for what they could. This, however, left me in some instances wondering if I could have done more. This is particularly true with the man in the opening scene.

<center>VIDEO CLIP in the healing centre (see uploaded video files)</center>

I heard him speaking in English and when he finally came out of his room and accepted to be filmed, he made a cry for help in front of the camera. After leaving the spiritual centre, Nurhamid and Feri inquired in their community about who this man was. I kept following on him after I returned to UK and was told that they had found his family. Sadly, a few months later this man died inside the healing centre. Could they have done more to save him? Should I have done more? The reality is that I do not know what else I or them could have done.

These fluctuations between priorities of roles cut across the whole film, including the edit when I was back in England. Some of the scenes I immediately edited out of the rough cut were the scenes that as a film-maker I would have lined up first. They were so emotionally charged, so moving that would have possibly made the documentary of appeal to some broadcasters. Yet, they also brought with them the risk of increasing stigma towards people with mental illness, or of developing negative feelings towards their families—who I realised, after spending hours with them, for the most part were just trying to protect the person with the means they had available as poor farmers located hours away from the only, overcrowded and under-funded, psychiatric facility in the area. This project was carried out in close collaboration with the local community, and I took every opportunity to consult with the several stakeholders, including community and spiritual leaders. Also in the editing process, I made every possible effort to be sensitive towards the way I represented the people I filmed, which included sending a copy of the film to the key people involved for their final

word, consulting with key global/cultural mental health experts, and organising preview screenings usually attended by people with lived experiences, for over 2 years before finally releasing the film at the end of 2015.

Who I was when I started this project is somewhat different from who I was when I finished it, and who I am now. Dennis O'Rourke, writing about his experience in filming *Cannibal Tours*, commented "I stumble, trance-like, through the field of ideas. Like the ideal tourist, I travel on a journey of discovery—on an unmarked road, to see where it leads. And I travel not in order to return; I cannot return to the point-of-departure because, in the meantime, I have been changed. This is why I say: 'I don't make the film, the film makes me.'"

At the point of starting this project, I had written several peer-review papers, presented at numerous conferences and had a book in press. Yet, the impact that working on *Breaking the chains* had on me is far deeper than any other project I worked on. The level of challenges it posed on a personal and professional way, the depth of relationship it developed between the people I worked with and the families I spent hours with, the level of insight it provided me on the issue of pasung, what it meant, why it occurred and what were barriers and facilitators in eradicating it, all of this was something I had never experienced or not at this degree in my previous projects. And this is why the making of *Breaking the chains* has also made me a better researcher, teacher, mental health professional and advocate, in addition to making me officially a documentary film-maker, as the film has entered various festivals.

I hope more academics and clinicians who have the luck of having access to important stories will also consider to start using films or photography to explore in greater depth and share stories, and 'play' with their several roles to be of the most benefit to the broader society.