

Body Maps: a visual participatory method involving the body



Figure 1: Body-part maps and hand-maps from 3-day workshop (from Luckett & Bagelman, 2023)

Introduction

Body mapping (BM) is a visual participatory exercise which has gained interest in Feminist Geography for the study of embodied experiences and their intersection with individual or community identities (De Jager et al., 2016). It involves participants creating life-sized visual representations of their bodies and their social embeddedness (Gastaldo et al., 2012). This is usually done by participants outlining their bodies (or parts of their body) on paper and using colors, symbols, pictures, texts, or other forms of visual material to represent their emotions and experiences concerning a specific topic.

By associating feelings and experiences to the body, BM aims to overcome the Western scientific paradigm of the human body as a passive recipient of its environment. It draws on critical feminist approaches to scientific inquiry, postulating that the body should be conceived of not as a mere 'shell' of the mind, but central to the construction of the individual as well as the social world, and thus a necessary starting point for social research.

Origins

The origins of BM, as a term and practice, are traced to a variety of topics such as data collection efforts concerning work safety by labor unions in the 1960s (Gastaldo et al., 2012) as well as to health ethnographers' efforts to study health and body awareness and to promote (mental) health education in the 1980s and 90s (Jokela-Pansini, 2021). Most prominently though, the current practices of Body Maps in research derive from an art therapy tool for persons living with HIV/AIDS developed in South Africa in the early 2000s (Jokela-Pansini, 2021).

The most prominent research adaptation of this art therapy methodology was developed by Gastaldo et al. (2012) who use what they call body map storytelling in their study of the impact of legal status on health and wellbeing of undocumented migrants. Their approach to body map storytelling was designed as an extensive one-on-one workshop method where researcher and participant co-create a body map, an interpretative key and a testimony.

This approach has since been adapted to fit a variety of contexts and extents. Skop (2016), for example, has adapted their framework to fit an extensive focus group research project on patient's experience of health care services in Canada. Other authors have merged or included different approaches and have studied a variety of topics such as gendered violence in urban space (Sweet & Escalante, 2015), homelessness (Schmidt, 2024), healthcare (Skop, 2016), migration (Davy et al., 2014) and environmental pollution (Jokela-Pansini, 2021; Luckett & Bagelman, 2023).

Body Mapping as a Research Method

In its adaptation for research purposes, body mapping has been described as a participatory method during which participants are asked to creatively visualize their embodied experiences (De Jager et al., 2016). Apart from creating a life-sized body map, the method often involves individual, or group discussions of the artwork created and the documentation (written or recorded) of the map's interpretation (Skop, 2016).

As a visual piece of data, body maps are often analyzed through visual methodologies (Rose, 2007; Davy et al., 2014; Gastaldo et al., 2012; Sweet & Escalante, 2015). However, most authors emphasize the importance of focusing on the participants' narrative and letting their voice speak for itself, rather than over-analyzing what they might have meant through their drawings. This is often done by letting participants explain their maps and collectively discussing potential meanings and documenting this 'interpretation key' either in a written way or as recordings/notes of discussions that can later also be treated as qualitative data (Gastaldo et al., 2012; Skop, 2016). Body mapping can therefore be understood as both a visual and a narrative qualitative method (Gastaldo et al., 2012).

Why Body Maps in a feminist research project?

Due to its grounding in feminist critical theory, BM has been used especially to study gendered experiences (Luckett & Bagelman, 2023; Schmidt, 2024; Sweet & Escalante, 2015; Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2017). Along these lines, some authors have proposed body mapping as an operationalization of the feminist indigenous concept of *Cuerpo-territorio* which originates in Latin-American communitarian feminisms (see for example Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2017; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021).

Cuerpo-territorio proposes an alternative ontology to the Western dichotomy between space (*territorio*) and the body (*cuerpo*) by arguing for the inextricable link between the body and the space it inhabits (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021). Mobilizing a decolonial ecofeminist perspective, proponents of the *Cuerpo-territorio* approach claim that the body is intimately connected to the territory, and thus their experiences cannot be separated (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021).

Body mapping, which is centered around the bodily experience of space, could thus help feminist researchers to operationalize this ontological shift into an epistemological approach (Schmidt, 2024).

Body mapping aims to reduce the inherent power imbalances between researchers and participants through a care ethics approach, focusing on accountability and shared control over research design and the generated data. In that line, it encourages participants to control their narratives and contribute actively to knowledge-making.

Especially when doing research with marginalized groups, such as migrant communities, body mapping can help researchers to let participants use their own voice to recount their stories (Jannesari 2022). Further, BM focuses on context and the socio-environmental conditions that shape participants' experiences and can thus ensure that their (marginalized) bodies are not reduced to single attributes, such as homeless (Schmidt, 2024), undocumented (Gastaldo et al., 2013) or sick (Skop, 2016), but represented as full, worthy parts of society and space.

Body mapping also aligns with feminist concerns around research ethics, that go beyond protecting participants anonymity and wellbeing. To avoid reproducing knowledge/power hierarchies while doing research, feminist methodologies are centered around reflexivity through the questioning and continuous evaluation of positionality and power dynamics (Peake & Mikhail, 2025). This means participants feeling empowered to exercise control over the research they are part of throughout the research process, emphasizing the co-creation of knowledge.

Proponents of the method further argue that the body maps methodology (if done right) facilitates reflexivity during the research process as it is centered around the participants' (and possibly the researchers') positionality and can provide time and space to reflect on this (Jokela-Pansini, 2021).

The method can also help researchers to include marginalized groups in knowledge creation by potentially bridging barriers of language and literacy (Gastaldo et al., 2012; Luckett & Bagelman, 2023). As such, it is a method suitable for engaged research seeking to unveil existing injustice and to spur transformative change.

Why Body Maps for studying climate-related health vulnerabilities with migrants?

Body Mapping has been widely used in research with marginalized groups—such as homeless individuals, women activists, survivors of gendered violence, and migrants—because it centers participants' voices and empowers them to shape their own narratives. When applied through a critical theory (CT) lens, BM allows participants to express their embodied experiences and reclaim agency over their identities and body-territories, challenging portrayals of them as passive victims. Body can be a source of empowerment and agency for migrant communities.

Body mapping's visual and participatory nature allows for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and fosters understanding of complex issues like migration and environmental impact (Gastaldo et al., 2012). It also provides a medium for participants to articulate their experiences in a culturally resonant manner (Jokela-Pansini, 2021) and potentially overcome language barriers that might inhibit more traditional qualitative research with migrant communities (Gastaldo et al., 2012). This will help also when holding workshops with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, assisting in establishing a common ground of understanding and potentially also in building networks and alliances between communities.

Lastly, Body Mapping has often been used not only as a research method but as tool for political advocacy, as the data generated represents an easily accessible tool for knowledge communication (Luckett & Bagelman, 2023; Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2017; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021).

All these aspects align with the overall goal of the IMBRACE project to harness knowledge(s) that come with and through migration around climate and health related vulnerability and adaptation. IMBRACE's goal is to 'trouble the margin' as a space where vulnerability is not static and nor solid for marginalized communities such as racialized migrants, but rather is fluid, contingent, differently understood and acted upon by communities themselves. Through body mapping we can focus on how knowledge that is embodied and in relation to the body can be mobilized to draw connections between local and global processes, places of migration origin and destination, and scientific expertise and tacit/everyday knowledges.

Implementing Body Maps

An adaptation of body mapping for the purposes of our project would involve adequate preparation, the organization of the session(s), and the analysis of the outcomes, as outlined below.

Preparation

Preparation would include establishing some first contact and relationship with the participants (either through a previous interview, meeting or though engagement with community-based partners). During this first meeting, the purpose of the study and the nature of the method would have to be well explained.

It would also involve a conversation about ethical considerations on issues such as confidentiality, support, caring atmosphere, resources for potential problems arising during sessions (e.g. assistance for relived trauma, psychological aid etc.), as well as questions around what happens to data if participants drop out, or what happens to the artwork after the workshop.

Body Mapping Sessions

In IMBRACE we will hold one day workshop (3-4h duration) for implementing this method with a group of 10 people (possibly split into 2 groups, morning/afternoon or by gender). It is important in the first session to introduce the method and take collective decisions concerning methodology (e.g. What does the method involve? Why are we doing it? Why/ How should I make art? Do I have to draw? What other options are there? How do I record my narrative (e.g. in text or spoken)? How do I want my art to be displayed to the public?

Body tracing

Body tracing or body part tracing is facilitated in a position chosen by the participant. Most authors ask participants to lay down to outline the body, however some remark that this can jeopardize the feeling of bodily sovereignty and thus suggest letting

participants decide whether to stand or lay down for tracing (Luckett & Bagelman, 2023; Schmidt, 2024).

Researchers and facilitators (if involved) should ensure that participants feel sovereign over their own bodies and what information is extracted from them throughout the process.

Luckett & Bagelman (2023) for example, apply an adaptation of BM to body-part mapping where participants decide what parts of their body to map and how to draw them (outlining or simply drawing), in order to ensure their empowerment over their bodies. Luckett & Bagelman (2023) start this exercise with an outlining of the hands and then go on to outline a chosen body part to 'ease into' the exercise and get acquainted with the art material.

Body tracing can be done in pairs between participants (Skop, 2016) or between participants and researchers (Schmidt, 2024). This requires a trusting relationship between participants (and researchers) which should be built before starting this exercise.

Mapping lived experiences

Mapping lived experiences and their effects on participants' bodies and wellbeing. This stage could include aspects of the migration journey (e.g. country of origin and of passage, arrival, settlement, current living situation etc.), the impact of environmental and climate conditions in both contexts (e.g. experience of heat or extreme rainfall in place of residence, workplace, free time), body scanning for health impacts of environmental conditions (heat/extreme rainfall) and intersectional positionality (e.g. being a migrant, a woman, from the MW), identification and visualization of support structures, adaptive strategies to extreme weather, symbolism or meaning given to certain body parts.

Here, researchers should acknowledge that silence around certain topics is also an important and legitimate choice of participants (Schmidt 2024).

Guiding Questions

- How am I (and my body) affected by extreme heat/extreme rainfall?
- How do these experiences relate to my identity (being for example a migrant/a woman/a racialized person)?
- How did my migration experience shape my experience of extreme heat/extreme rainfall?
- How does my identity shape my access to adaptation infrastructure?

Creating a narrative key and/or message to the public

This step depends on what decisions have been taken at the beginning concerning dissemination of maps. During this time, participants will be asked to share what their drawings represent. They should be reminded that they can and feel empowered to not share aspects that are too personal or difficult to share.

During this sharing, researchers can ask participants about the meanings of different symbols, colors, features etc. and record this (upon consent). Participants can be asked to write or record a message to the public to go with their body map (e.g. in an exhibition).

Visualization of future aspirations

Visualization of aspirations, goals, dreams, and fears for the future. It is important to provide space for participants to speak for issues that go beyond problems, challenges and vulnerability.

In IMBRACE we will combine Body Maps workshops with a method called “postcards from the future” to prompt future-oriented goals, needs and desires. If this is not possible, dedicating some time of the body mapping to discuss future perspectives is important.

Collective discussion of body mapping

Collective discussion of body mapping (content and process). Ask participants to discuss similarities, differences, themes, discourses etc. within and across body maps.

As part of this discussion, a collective body maps analysis could be also facilitated, teasing out some main themes (recording this discussion will produce text-based qualitative data that can be used to triangulate findings from visual analysis and/or creating coding scheme).

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