

## FIELD NOTES #1

### From the Placing Unheard Voices Study

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Exploring lived experience, arts-based research, and the power of sharing stories

## Why arts-based research?

Imagine trying to explain a deeply personal and emotional experience using only statistics and formal academic language—it's difficult to convey the depth of feeling, right? That's what I experienced when I first began sharing findings from *Placing Unheard Voices*. Traditional academic formats didn't leave room for the emotion, nuance, and complexity expressed by participants. Arts-based research (ABR) offers a way through. It is an innovative approach to exploring and sharing knowledge through creative practices—poetry, painting, music, theatre, illustration, and more. These artistic methods enable us to express emotion and meaning in ways that conventional research methods cannot.

### *ABR: Show, express, and evoke meaning through art*

As a poet, I was especially drawn to using poetic methods in my research. This has been transformative—not only in my research but also in my personal life with Parkinson's. Poetry has helped me communicate both participants' emotions and my own, while also allowing me to reflect critically on my role as a researcher living with illness.



### *Collaboration and participation*

The collaborative nature of ABR enables powerful forms of storytelling, both individual and collective, that are accessible, emotionally resonant, and deeply engaging.

There are many ways to practice ABR collaboratively. One approach in *Placing Unheard Voices* involved creating multimedia illustrations, including the illustration you see here. This illustration developed in collaboration with illustrator Sam McLaughlan as we explored the question *what does it feel like to live with Parkinson's?* The fluid lines and colours, and expressive movements in the illustration capture the shifting emotional reality of Parkinson's—think for a minute how different these illustrations are to the usual lists of symptoms that are so often used to explain illness.

These visual pieces reflect the conversations that inspired our book *Start at Belonging* and offer a more intuitive, emotional entry point into the illness experience.

# Getting started with ABR

In my own practice, I often begin by:

- Experimenting with metaphor to communicate complex emotions expressed by participants or myself.
- Using visual storytelling as a framework for making research findings more relatable and accessible.
- Collaborating on shared or performative projects, such as group poetry readings, spoken word performances, or short dramatic skits.

## *Taking an “art \*is\* the research” approach*

Over time, I’ve grown more confident in approaching art not just as a way to present findings, but as a research method in its own right. This approach is especially powerful when exploring inequities or social justice issues, because it questions whose voices matter, what “counts” as knowledge, and who is seen as the expert.

In *Placing Unheard Voices*, I chose to write a book of research and personal poems instead of producing standard academic articles. The result is a creative publication that puts participants’ voices front and centre.

## *Use ABR to prioritise working \*with\* people*

One of the greatest strengths of ABR is its potential for collaboration. Rather than studying people from a distance, ABR invites shared processes and opens space for many voices and perspectives. It positions participants as co-creators of knowledge, giving them agency in how their stories are shaped and shared.

# The challenge of arts-based research and collaboration

Of course, ABR raises important questions and tensions, such as:

- Who controls the final artistic work—the researcher or the participants?
- How can you ensure people’s experiences aren’t misrepresented?
- Is the work still “valid” if it’s primarily artistic rather than text-based?

These are not always easy questions to answer, but grappling with them is part of what makes ABR a rich and ethical practice.

# The future of arts-based research

Despite its growth, ABR still faces resistance within some academic circles. Some scholars and institutions continue to question its legitimacy. But things are changing. More universities, healthcare providers, and policy spaces are recognising the value of creative approaches in research.

Arts-based methods are becoming more visible, more valued—and, I believe, more vital than ever.