



## Photovoice: A Methodological Guide

Camille A. Sutton-Brown

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# Photovoice: A Methodological Guide

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**Camille A. Sutton-Brown**

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## **Abstract**

Photovoice methodology has gained in popularity in the two decades since its inception by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in the early 1990s. As a participatory action research strategy, photovoice is typically used with marginalized populations that have been silenced in the political arena. Using ethnographic techniques that combine photography, critical dialogue, and experiential knowledge, participants reflect on and communicate their community's concerns to represent their culture, to expose social problems, and to ignite social change. Photovoice has been successfully used in the fields of education, disability studies, public health, and refugees, indicating its vast applicability. This methodology provides a culturally grounded and contextually situated site for reflection on visual images, associated meanings, and social action. Despite its increasing use as a research methodology, little information exists in the literature concerning how to implement a photovoice study. This article is not a how-to guide; rather, it draws heavily upon Wang and Burris's work as well as other studies to serve as a resource that details and outlines various ways to conduct a photovoice project. Drawing upon the author's work, this article also illustrates the complete research design of one photovoice study.

**Keywords:** photographic research methodology, participatory action research, women's empowerment, feminist methodology, microfinance

## **Introduction**

Building on a rich tradition while adding to the evolutionary development of photography-based research, Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris developed photovoice methodology in the 1990s. Typically used with marginalized groups, photovoice participants identify, document, and represent their community's strengths and concerns from their own perspective through the use of a specific photographic technique (Wang 1999). Initially conceived as a health promotion tool, this participatory action research strategy has become increasingly popular (Lal, Jarus, and Suto 2012). It has been applied to the disciplines of education,

disability studies, public health, international development, parenting, and refugees. Photovoice interrogates contextually based meanings from an insider perspective as a means to generate new insights into our socially constructed realities and cultures. It oscillates between private and public worlds in its attempt to publicize and politicize personal struggle via photography, narratives, critical dialogue, and social action. Thus, photovoice broadens the nature of photography from being a fine art form to being central to socially and politically engaged praxis.

Surprisingly, despite its increasing use as a research methodology, very little information exists in academic literature about how to conduct a photovoice study. This article is not a how-to guide, as there is no universal format to dictate the procedures for implementing a photovoice project. Rather, this article is a compilation of the literature to serve as a resource, primarily for beginner photovoice researchers, that details and outlines various ways that a project can be carried out from beginning to end. It draws heavily upon Wang and Burris's work as well as studies from other researchers. The author's recent fieldwork, conducted in Mali with female microfinance borrowers, is also presented to illustrate the complete research design of one photovoice study.

Photovoice was born out of three distinct theoretical frameworks: empowerment education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and documentary photography. The overall aims of each of these frameworks support an action-oriented, participant-directed method. Freire's concept, empowerment education for critical consciousness, purports that individual and community involvement are necessary to achieve social equity (Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain 2006). Having now become synonymous with emancipatory community development approaches (Carlson et al. 2006), this approach encourages critical group dialogue in an attempt to foster critical understanding

and critical action (Freire 1973). Feminist theory is grounded in the assumption that knowledge is experiential, and seeks to develop a political consciousness in the face of unequal gendered relationships (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Documentary photographers attempt to capture the everyday lives of a specific group of people to produce an emotional testimony of their experiences (Jing and Yun 2007) as they narrate stories in a photographic language to express the social conscience (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2004). It is at once humanistic, emotional, and compassionate as it is radical and political (Kuo 2007). Wang and Burris used the various strengths of each of these three frameworks to create photovoice methodology.

Photovoice is grassroots activist research rooted in problem-based inquiry (Burris and Wang 1997). It is steeped in the tradition of including visual representation in research due to its ability to transmit messages (Wang et al. 2004) and to ignite social critique (Stanczak 2007) against a contextualized backdrop that is culturally grounded. Photovoice researchers put cameras in the hands of individuals who are often silenced in the political sphere so that they can represent their community and narrate their everyday experiences using their own voices (Foster-Fishman 2005) to become catalysts for social change. The primary objectives are threefold: (1) For participants to identify, record, and reflect on community needs; (2) To promote critical dialogue; (3) To reach policy makers to enact social change toward community improvement (Wang and Burris 1997). With the intent to benefit the participants and community involved, photovoice methodology includes an explicit political agenda. It is this commitment to social action that distinguishes it from other photo-elicitation methods.

The particulars of photovoice methodology are discussed throughout this article, which is structured as follows. Following a brief overview of the methodological steps involved in a

photovoice study, each step is described in detail. The steps are organized in two sections. In the first section, headed "Background," I explain the purpose of the step followed by various options for implementing the step based on current literature. In the second section, headed "Example," I detail how I implemented the step in a recent photovoice study I conducted.<sup>1</sup> This way, a single study is described in detail, from beginning to end, as an illustrative example of the full implementation of a photovoice study.

## Research Process

Photovoice uses participatory research methods to encourage participants to lead the research process as they visually represent and narrate their everyday experiences (Foster-Fishman 2005). Participatory research models were developed in response to critiques of the power dynamics inherent in traditional research methods wherein the researcher usually makes the key decisions that pertain to the research process. Placing the participants at the center of the study to dictate much of the research process affords them greater decision-making agency than in traditional researcher-directed studies. Such approaches also define the researcher's role more as a facilitator than the sole authority. In addition, photovoice also encourages participants, who are assumed to be experts of their own situation (Wang, Burris, and Ping 1996) to draw upon their personal histories and experiences, while emphasizing the importance of telling *their* story, rather than trying to tell *the* story. Photovoice researchers conceptualize this practice as a medium of knowledge transfer; whereby the researchers and policy makers are on the receiving end of instruction (Wang 1999; McIntyre 2003).

As a cautionary note, all participatory models are not created equal. Jurkowski (2008) notes that though photovoice was developed to be a participatory means in which to engage the participants in all phases of the

project, it is not always implemented as such. Photovoice can also be conducted in controlled, researcher-directed settings, which creates an authoritarian, rather than authoritative, research model. The empowering model of engagement that Booth and Booth (2003) describe lies in the relinquishment of research-based decision-making agency in favor of designing the study according to the participants' collective self-identified needs and preferences. Thus, to maintain fidelity to the original concept, the participants should be actively involved in all phases of the research process as feasible.

As photovoice is participant-directed, the preliminary questions that guide a study are malleable. This openness allows for increased responsiveness to the participants' identified needs, as well as for the exploration of new areas of discovery as they emerge (Patton 2002). The flexibility of the research design makes it highly adaptable to best fit the participants' specific needs as well as the sociopolitical context of the community in which the project is situated (Burris and Wang 1997).<sup>2</sup> Though this methodology lacks a regimented uniform structure for implementation, there is a general framework and certain procedures to characterize it as a photovoice study. Wang and Burris outline the following steps for conducting a photovoice study:

- 1 Select and recruit a target audience of policy makers or community leaders.
- 2 Recruit a group of photovoice participants.
- 3 Introduce the photovoice methodology to participants and facilitate a group discussion.
- 4 Obtain informed consent.
- 5 Pose an initial theme for taking pictures.
- 6 Distribute cameras to participants and review how to use them.
- 7 Provide time for participants to take pictures.
- 8 Meet to discuss photographs.

- 9 Plan with participants a format to share photographs and stories with policy makers or community leaders. (Wang 1999)

In detailing each step, I show that there is some flexibility regarding the ways in which each step is conducted. As explained in a subsequent section, I believe that it is more appropriate to select the target audience of policy makers during the course of the study, rather than at the outset, thus I have modified the chronology of the steps to reflect this change.

## Recruit a Group of Photovoice Participants

### Background

The context of the photovoice project strongly determines the recruitment process to be used. If the project will be implemented with an already established group, the researcher can propose the idea to the group and interested members can sign up to participate. However, if the researcher wants to create a group that is solely for the purpose of a photovoice project, then other recruitment strategies will be necessary. In a Michigan study with homeless persons, Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) posted flyers to advertise the project, the Youth Empowerment Strategies project made class presentations to grade 5 students in six different schools to recruit the participants (Wilson et al. 2007), and Jurkowski (2008) relied on agency referrals to recruit participants for a study with Latinos who have intellectual disabilities. Depending on the specific criteria that the researcher sets forth, purposeful recruitment may be necessary to attract people who reflect certain characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, disability, or health status (Wang 1999). For example, one requirement to take part in a quality of life photovoice project with breast cancer survivors in rural North Carolina was that the participants had to self-identify as

African-American and have completed their initial cancer treatment. The researchers collaborated with health officials from the North Carolina Breast Cancer Screening Program to make contact with women who satisfied these criteria to recruit them for the study (Lopez et al. 2005).

Since photovoice is used with marginalized populations, it may potentially be difficult for an outside researcher to gain access to members of these groups. In such cases, convenient recruitment tactics may be necessary to recruit enough participants for the study. This may include partnering with local organizations or using existing client databases (Hergenrather et al. 2009). Regardless of the recruitment technique, a group size of seven to ten participants is ideal (Wang 1999) to encourage in-depth group conversation. If the total number of participants exceeds ten people, they can be divided into separate groups, so that each group has a maximum of ten participants.

### Example

I used both purposeful and convenient recruitment techniques to invite six women to participate in my study. Recruitment procedures began immediately upon my arrival at the research site. I met with Madame Maiga<sup>3</sup>—the executive director of the Malian Microfinance Association (MMA)—to introduce myself, to inform her of the overall aims of the study, and to explain the study in detail. I sought her advice concerning recruitment strategies. She advised that, because of my linguistic limitations, unfamiliarity with the city, and cultural norms, I would likely have difficulty recruiting participants on my own. I agreed. Therefore, I was not the one who directly recruited the participants. I presented Madame Maiga with my screening criteria: female, an MMA client for a minimum time of one year, and who had used the microfinance loan for business activities. The MMA staff arranged for six women to meet me to learn about the research project.

## **Introduce Photovoice Methodology to Participants and Facilitate a Group Discussion**

### **Background**

The initial group meeting serves three main purposes: to introduce the participants to one another; to explain the methodology of photovoice, and to discuss the responsibilities and risks of being a photographer. Photovoice is discussed with a brief overview of its theoretical premise and examples of past projects. It also informs the potential participants of the commitment and intent toward policy change so that they are aware of this primary outcome and what their role may involve. Also included in the discussion are the responsibilities associated with photographing people and events in the community, particularly with respect to the risks, the power, and the ethics involved.

### **Example**

With the assistance of Madame Maiga, I arranged an introductory meeting with the recruited women. In the first part of the meeting I presented a brief overview of photovoice. I particularly emphasized that it is oriented toward social enhancement, and that participant roles may potentially include advocacy activities. The second part of the meeting focused specifically on my intended project. I outlined my vision for the project, describing my ideas about meeting regularly, having discussions about Malian women's roles and responsibilities, them taking photographs about various topics related to microfinance, and creating a forum to share their photographs and narratives with others. During this meeting, and throughout the project, I encouraged them to be assertive and to make most of the project-related decisions. Thus, I communicated that my vision was suggestive, and encouraged the women to give input according to their own desires. During the third part of the meeting I addressed

ethical and safety issues relating to their role of being photographers in the community to minimize the possibility of participant harm and emphasize that "no picture is worth taking if it begets the photographer harm or ill will" (Wang, Cash, and Powers 2000: 87).

## **Obtain Informed Consent**

### **Background**

Photovoice involves research with human subjects, thus it requires ethics approval from a formal institutional board. The researchers should make it clear to the potential participants that their participation is voluntary, the potential benefits and harm that may result from the study, and the goal of the study. Since photovoice involves the participants taking photographs of others, there are other informed consent considerations that are specific to this method. Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) suggest using three separate consent forms. Project participants sign the first consent form prior to the commencement of the study to signify their voluntary participation. The second consent form, termed the acknowledgment and release form, is given to the participants when the cameras are distributed. This form is for the participants to give to the people who appear in their photographs. This consent form asks for the subject's permission to be photographed and agreement to waive their rights to the photos. Informed consent is not needed for photos in which human subjects appear, but remain unrecognizable. The researcher gives the third consent form to the participants after the photos are developed. This form asks for each participant's permission to allow the researcher to use their photos for publication and other possible forms of public distribution. This ensures that participants retain control to censor the images and decide which ones the researcher can access and disseminate.

### Example

IRB approval for this study granted a waiver of documentation, thus I obtained informed consent verbally from each participant, which I recorded on a Dictaphone. After informing the participants about the study and detailing the research process, all six women gave consent to participate in this study. They also consented to be audio recorded during research-related discussions, and to allow me to take photographs of them during the research process.

The participants were told to obtain verbal consent from individuals whose faces appeared in their photographs. I asked the women multiple times, most notably at the end of the project when we discussed dissemination options, for permission to use their photographs in publications and other possible forms of public distribution. Apart from one specific photograph that Salima asked to be removed from the collection, the women gave me permission to publish all of the photographs that they took in addition to the photos that I took of them.

### Pose an Initial Theme for Taking Pictures

#### Background

Creswell (2003) suggests that the initial research questions in qualitative studies remain open-ended, and stated in broad terms to allow for the possibility of evolutionary development during the research process. In photovoice, the researcher typically chooses an initial general topic then asks the participants to decide on the specific questions, problem, and/ or issues that they would like to address in relation to that topic. The topic that the researcher proposes should be narrow enough to focus the study, yet broad enough to allow for additional and more specific questions to emerge from the group discussions and/ or from the data. For example, Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) conducted a photovoice study with a group of men and women who resided at a shelter in Michigan to

discuss homelessness. Homelessness is a broad topic, encompassing many subtopics, so at one of the meetings, the participants decided to focus on their survival skills, stereotypes, and the day-to-day challenges of being homeless. Encouraging the participants to define and conceptualize the research question(s) for themselves enables them to assume agency within the research process and have it be a direct reflection of their own desires. Deciding on the specific issues to discuss is a collaborative process, and the researcher should encourage the participants to brainstorm many possible ideas before they decide on the specific one(s) they want to address.

### Example

The general topic that I had chosen for this study was women's empowerment in relation to participation in a microfinance program. The subthemes that the participants decided to explore included how microfinance has impacted their perceived empowerment, the importance of economic savings in relation to empowerment, financial independence and empowerment, empowerment in the context of familial and community respect, empowerment and social relationships, and changes to the MMA that could increase women's empowerment. The women decided upon the subthemes during the course of the project at the commencement of each new photo assignment (discussed in a later section).

### Distribute Cameras to Participants and Review How to Use Them

#### Background

Disposable cameras, Polaroid cameras, film cameras, and digital cameras are all possibilities for use in a photovoice project. As the research budget may be the strongest determinant of which camera to use, the researcher will likely assume full responsibility for this decision. Practical considerations, such as the distance

to the closest film developing center and the accessibility to a computer to upload and view digital photos determine whether to use film or digital cameras. Reusable cameras may be a more cost-effective option than disposable cameras if more than a few rolls of film will be taken.

The emphasis in photovoice is on the content of the photo and the meaning that the photographer attributes to it, not the quality of the photograph (Wang 1999). Therefore, the purpose of the camera training workshop is to teach the participants only the basic camera operations and functions deemed necessary, as providing more complex technical training would stifle the participants' creativity in creating images (Wang and Burris 1997). Since the photographs are a means for the participants to communicate their everyday experiences to others, the workshop also includes instruction on the aesthetic composition of images and how they can be framed to achieve a particular objective. As the interpretation of photos is a negotiated process between the photographer and viewer (Pink 2001), participants are shown the various ways in which photos can be composed to evoke a certain response from the viewer in an attempt to tell the story that they want to tell.

### Example

Reusable digital cameras were used in this study due to the absence of photo developing centers at the research site. There was also very limited access to power outlets, therefore the camera the women used was powered by AA batteries. I distributed the cameras and conducted several camera training sessions during our third and fourth meetings. I taught the women how to orient the camera, how to turn the camera on and off, which button to press to take a photo, how to zoom in and out, how to keep the camera steady to avoid creating blurry images, and how to review the photos that they had taken. We also spent a considerable amount of time

discussing how to take photographs to depict abstract concepts. During the course of the project I provided ongoing camera training to the group in addition to giving individual instruction to those who wanted to spend more time learning the art of photography.

### Provide Time for Participants to Take Pictures

#### Background

The length of time that participants have to take photos is entirely dependent on the specific photovoice project. The issues addressed, accessibility to the people to be photographed, and the time availability of the participants are some of the influential factors. It is likely that the researcher has an anticipated time frame for the entire project due to budget and/ or time considerations. This can be communicated to the participants at the outset of the study. They should then be given the opportunity to decide, within the parameters of the suggested time frame, how long they would like to have for the photographing stage. Shorter photovoice projects, lasting up to two weeks (Hergenrather et al. 2009), may require that participants take all of their photos in only a few days. In longer projects, such as McIntyre's (2003) yearlong study with women in Belfast, participants have multiple periods of time in which they photograph. Within each time period, the participants complete a small photo project that addresses a particular aspect of the central issue. For example, the participants in Lopez et al.'s (2005) study completed five photo assignments over a seven-month period. Castleden and Garvin (2008) used a more varied approach, wherein each participant had a flexible amount of time to complete the roll of film that they had been given. The researchers used an ongoing recruitment process during their six-month data collection phase and opted not to have regular meetings with a single group. Instead

they held individual reflection sessions with each participant. As these examples demonstrate, photovoice can be adapted to match the group with which it is being used to best accommodate their time availability. Regardless of the format, participants should decide and be clear from the initial group meeting about the amount of time that they will have to photograph so that they can plan accordingly.

### Example

Consistent with the model of a longer photovoice project, this study incorporated several photo assignments as a means to capture various aspects of the central topic. The participants collectively agreed upon the following topics for the photo assignments: the women's business activities, economic independence related to the impact of their microfinance loan on their businesses, savings and its relation to empowerment, changes in their domestic relationships as a function of microfinance, their suggested changes to the MMA that would improve the agency, and the disempowerment that they have experienced with having to secure a co-signer for their microfinance loan.

The amount of the time that they had to take photos varied between two and five days. When the photo assignment topic was decided on Wednesday, the women had until the following Monday to take photographs. They all then shared their photos with the group on the Monday afternoon. At the end of the Monday meetings the group would decide on the next photo assignment. They then had two days to photograph as they shared them the following Wednesday afternoon. As there was very little time to photograph for each assignment, I encouraged the women to continue to take photographs on previous photo assignments throughout the project if they had an idea for a photo after the sharing of that particular assignment had occurred.

## Meet to Discuss Photographs

### Background

A key component of photovoice is the sharing of photographs to initiate critical dialogue. Photovoice prioritizes the interpretation of the photographs more than the actual photographs themselves (Wang and Burris 1997). The images convey participant representations of a topic, but it is the accompanying narratives that teach others about participant concerns and strengths (Hergenrather et al. 2009). Thus, in the group critical dialogue stage, participants share their photos and corresponding stories with the group in an effort to situate the content of the photographs in their own experiences.

After the participants take their photographs there is a group meeting (or several group meetings depending on the time frame of the project), within which each participant shares their images with the group. Some studies ask the participants to select the few photos that they feel are the most significant (Wang 1999), while others ask the participants to discuss all of the photos that they have taken (Castleden and Garvin 2008). The decision of which format to use may be influenced by factors such as the length of the group meeting, the number of meetings, and the number of photos each participant has taken.

Wang and Burris use a specific technique for the participants to discuss each image. They term this technique "SHOWeD," and it is an acronym of the questions that the participants answer about each question:

- What do you See here?
- What is really Happening here?
- How does this relate to Our lives?
- Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
- What can we Do about it? (Wang 1999)

Participants may choose a different means for sharing their photographs, as long as they

contextualize each image. After all of the participants have shared their photos and stories, the group engages in data analysis. With help from the facilitator, the participants analyze the content and context of the photographs and discuss the themes and issues that have emerged from the data. Since photovoice is action-oriented research, they codify the findings as issues to address (Wang 1999). This participant-directed analysis process encourages participation from all of the group members, with the understanding that each image may generate many meanings (Wang et al. 1998). This analytic process, as well as the group dialogue, focuses both on individual storytelling and on the group's narratives. The focus of photovoice is not to create a group consensus, but rather to present and explore the multiple experiences and realities that participants have to allow for deeper understanding of the community (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005).

### Example

The women met immediately following the completion of each photo assignment to engage in critical group dialogue. They decided that each person would share every photo that she took and contextualize each image. During the first photo sharing session, I used the SHOWeD technique to facilitate the sharing of images. It was soon apparent that the women did not prefer this method. For subsequent photo-sharing sessions, each woman spoke freely about each photograph she had taken for that particular photo assignment, detailing what was happening in the photo. They usually described why they took the photo, why they felt that it was an important issue to document, and they connected the photograph to the general topic of the photo assignment. Once all of the women had shared their photographs we began the group dialogue.

During the group dialogue, the women drew connections between various photographs, relating their own to ones that others had taken.

They also discussed issues that they thought were important and which they had not represented in their photographs. The women performed content analyses of each photo assignment by discussing the general themes that emerged from the collective photographs and testimonies. Following each meeting, I transcribed the discussion and added captions to the photos by writing everything that was said about it below the image. I read through the transcribed data and did a preliminary analysis of the themes that the women identified. As preliminary analysis "helps the field-worker cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new ... data" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 50), this process allowed me to form new questions which I then asked in subsequent meetings.

### Select and Recruit a Target Audience of Policy Makers or Community Leaders

#### Background

An underlying assumption of photovoice is that the sharing of the project's photographs and corresponding narratives with a public audience leads to policy change (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005). Therefore, an important step is identifying and selecting a target audience to whom the findings will be presented. The target audience may include peers and the general public, but it must also include people and/ or agencies that hold enough power to initiate political discussion and/ or change (Wang and Pies 2004). Such people may include local politicians, school administrators, the board of directors of a community center, health officials, and/ or media outlets. If the audience is void of such influential people, then the primary goal of igniting social action is unlikely to be achieved.

Wang (1999) suggests recruiting the members of the target audience at the outset of the study. In their first study using photovoice, Wang and Burris (1997) termed this target

audience a “guidance group,” and it consisted of provincial and county-level policy makers and health officials. Once the participants were recruited, they were introduced to the guidance group, and they were in contact throughout the study. Wang and Burris report satisfaction with selecting the target audience at the beginning of the project, stating that it helped to foster collaboration between them and the participants. Despite the perceived success of this practice, I believe that it defies photovoice’s commitment to adhere to a participant-guided agenda.

As inductive reasoning is central to qualitative analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 2007), and the specific focus of exploratory studies may remain undefined until data collection and analysis are complete (Maxwell 1996), selecting an audience of policy makers prior to the study may be counterproductive to the goal of a photovoice project as it may limit the scope of the study. This practice also implies that the researcher has a preconceived notion of the project findings and contradicts photovoice’s participant-directed process. Wang and Burris (1997) purport that it is the critical dialogue that emerges from the group meetings that is the catalyst for social change. Thus, if the target audience, and consequently the intended policy changes, are decided upon by the researcher prior to the commencement of the study, the main purpose of the critical dialogue may be somewhat negated.

To better embrace the fluid nature of qualitative research and to fully allow the participants to assume decision-making agency within the research process, it may be more appropriate to identify the target audience during the course of the project. This is perhaps best if it occurs at the end of the sharing photographs/ critical dialogue stage. This way, the policy makers will be chosen according to the actual (not anticipated) themes and findings that emerge from the group discussions and the overall project.

### Example

The women in this study expressed a strong desire to share their work with an audience, both in their community and nationally and/ or internationally. At the local level, the women decided to hold a forum with Madame Maiga and staff of the MMA. They wanted it to be a forum that would allow them to speak directly to the people who have the authority to make changes accordingly. Thus, the local audience was a purposeful selection of individuals who could directly impact their lives by addressing the issues that the women deemed important. At the national/ international level, the women did not specify a specific audience with whom they wanted to share their work. They suggested creating a book, a photographic exhibition, a film comprised of their photographs and narratives, and/ or newspaper interviews. The women gave me permission to disseminate the project in other forms that I might think of at a later date and which I feel would be appropriate to engage foreign communities in transnational dialogues.

### Plan with Participants a Format to Share Photographs and Stories with Policy Makers or Community Leaders

#### Background

This step is highly dependent on the specific project and its intended goals. When the intention of the study is to raise public awareness about an issue, the participants may plan to create an exhibition to share their photographs and stories. The National Geographic headquarters in Washington, DC held such an exhibition in 2007. It included a gallery of photos from a photo camp project undertaken with Congolese refugees in Uganda. A smaller exhibition may entail posting the photos in the local recreation center and inviting community members to attend. If the goal of a photovoice project is to change a school policy, then a public exhibition may be less effective than a

slideshow presentation to the administrators, teachers, and/ or school district officials. Inviting journalists to exhibitions to gain media coverage is a strategic way to raise public awareness. When possible, the photovoice participants can attend the presentation/exhibition to field questions from the audience and to provide more information and insight, beyond the scope of the two-dimensional presentation format.

Regardless of the format for dissemination, it is imperative to present the photographs along with the corresponding photographer's attributed meaning. To fail to do so would defy the essence of photovoice, which prioritizes the photographers' perspective of how they specifically understand and make meaning of their everyday experiences. Their narratives are presented to others as a way to convey their interpretation of their photos as a way to represent their own realities.

### Example

To disseminate the project to the local constituents whom the women had identified, we held a forum at the MMA sixteen days after our last meeting. In attendance were five of the six participants, along with Madame Maiga and two MMA loan officers. The executive director of an MFI located almost 9 miles away also attended. This forum lasted two hours and consisted of two parts: the slideshow presentation and an open discussion. For the presentation to the MMA, we used the data to create a slideshow of the women's photographs and corresponding narratives. The discussion part of the forum was an open dialogue between the MMA staff and the women, and it lasted for approximately 45 minutes. The dialogue between the women and the MMA staff was a question and answer session with both groups of people asking questions. The MMA staff asked questions that elaborated on what the women presented in their photographs and corresponding narratives, while the women asked questions of clarification

about some of the programs that the MMA offers. The women also used the forum as an opportunity to express their dislike of certain MMA policies and operational logistics that they felt should be changed and improved.

### Other Considerations

In addition to the outlined steps, there are other considerations that must be taken into account when designing a photovoice study. Most notably are issues related to the meeting logistics (meeting schedule and location) as well as whether or not to offer compensation to the participants. The participant-directed nature of photovoice extends beyond issues such as selecting photo assignments and guiding the focus group conversations; it is also inclusive of the logistical aspects of the research process. Each of these is discussed below with reference to my recent study.

### Meeting Location and Schedule

The meeting schedule and the meeting location were both determined by the participants. The participants selected a meeting place that was familiar to them and provided a relaxed atmosphere. The meeting schedule they drafted was not too disruptive to their daily activities in the home or their commercial activities. During the introductory meeting, I asked the women to decide upon a time and date for our first meeting. At this first meeting the participants established the meeting schedule for the project based on their availability. They collectively decided that the meeting dates and time for the project would be Mondays and Wednesdays at 3.00 p.m. The group met a total of twelve times over the course of six weeks plus an additional two hours to deliver a presentation and participate in a forum with Madame Maiga and other staff members at the MMA.

Rather than meeting at the MMA, which Salima said was not a good place for us to meet because of all the noise, constant movement of

people, and lack of privacy, we met in a room in one of the city's residential quarters. Its strategic location in a family's compound permitted a high degree of privacy. All of the participants approved this meeting space, chosen by Jazirah, before I was informed of the location. The room was equipped with a small chalkboard on the wall and was large enough for the eight of us (six participants, Amadou, and myself) to fit in comfortably. At the last meeting, the women voluntarily contributed an equal amount of money to give to the proprietor of the home to show their gratitude and to help pay for the electricity needed for the electric fan that we used and for the tea that was served during our meetings. As the project director, I had not been asked to pay for the meeting location, so I also voluntarily offered a sum of money to the proprietor.

### Compensation

For this study, I provided monetary stipends for participation. The women who participated in this study have limited financial resources, and the time that they spent in group meetings as well as the time that they dedicated to taking photographs was time away from their businesses and their families. Thus, in this context I felt that it was appropriate to offer stipends. The amount of the stipend was determined by discussions with local informants regarding an appropriate amount.

I also offered nonmonetary forms of compensation. The participants kept the digital cameras and memory cards. To have conducted this project and then taken away the tools for photography (i.e., cameras) at the end of the project would have been disempowering, which contradicts the empowerment potential of photovoice methodology. Therefore, I gave, not loaned, the cameras to the women. I distributed an additional three-month supply of AA batteries to each participant. I also printed five of each woman's photographs (printed on a portable photo printer that I had brought to Mali) to give to her, as there were no photo

processing centers at the research site where I could print digital photos. Each woman said that she knew at least one person who owned a DVD player. Thus, I burned a CD for each woman, comprised of every single photo she had taken, and gave it to her so that she could view the photos on a television via a DVD player. The store Best Buy at Northlake (in Georgia, US) generously donated the cameras, memory cards, and batteries along with Best Buy T-shirts for each participant in the study.

### Limitations

Overall, the photovoice method encourages the participants to take ownership of their communities. By placing them in change agent positions, photovoice helps participants realize the power that they have to make the changes that can improve their community. However, despite all of the benefits associated with this method, photovoice is not perfect in its scope or execution. As with all other research methods, photovoice does have some limitations—the first being that it is a time-consuming method that demands a lot of resources.

### Resources

Depending on the length of a study, the size of the group, the type of cameras used, and the number of photos each participant takes, the cost of doing a photovoice study could be quite expensive. Photovoice demands the availability of certain resources: cameras, film (if using film cameras), memory cards and a computer (if using digital cameras), and picture developing. It might be necessary to hire a photographer for the initial camera training session.

If monetary resources are not readily available to the researcher, he or she may opt to seek outside funding to support a photovoice project. This should be done with caution, as receiving external funding may subject the study to following the demands of the funding agency (Cheek 2005) and jeopardize the integrity of the

study. This may be particularly relevant to the social action component, as certain companies/organizations may not want to be associated with some of the political acts that may result from a photovoice project. Thus, in giving funding they may place restrictions on the acceptable social improvement activities, which may conflict with the decisions that the participants make.

In an attempt to reduce expenses photovoice researchers can consider a few possible accommodations such as (a) use digital cameras and view the participants' images on a computer in the group sessions rather than developing and printing each photograph; (b) have participants work in pairs, rather than individually, and provide each pair with a camera; and (c) have only one camera for the project, which each participant could reserve for specific days.

### Time Demands

Photovoice is a time-demanding research methodology (Wang and Burris 1997). The researchers as well as the participants are required to invest a great amount of time and energy into the project. It requires participants to attend a preliminary workshop on photovoice and ethics training, a seminar on camera training, time to take photos in the community, follow-up group meetings, and participation in social action activities. Depending on the length of the project, this may occur within a period of two weeks or over the course of months. Due to the time requirements, attrition may be an issue (Castelden and Garvin 2008). If the project is implemented with an intact group that meets regularly, this may not be much of a concern. However, if it consists of creating a group specifically for the project then the excessive time demands may be a limiting factor. To address this some studies have provided compensation at the end of the project as an incentive for participants to complete the study. Examples of compensation that researchers have used are money, photo albums, food, gift cards, credit for

photo film processing that could be used after the study, and allowing the participants to keep their digital cameras (Hergenrather et al. 2009).

### Politics

One of the main tenets of photovoice is to "initiate grassroots social change" (Wang et al. 2004: 911). This explicitly constructs photovoice as a research method with a predetermined political agenda. Despite it being heralded as being an empowering research method by some (Jurkowski 2001, McIntyre 2003, Castelden and Garvin 2008), photovoice may be limited by the spaces in which it can exercise its empowering potential.

Policy directly reflects power relations. Policies are in place to dictate how things should be, and to try to change them requires a dismantling of what is currently in place. Thus, when citizens initiate political change, regardless of how basic or revolutionary their demands may be, the acts occur outside of the current political system. Therefore, when people attempt to change a political condition they commit a political act (Wang and Burris 1997). This is important for photovoice researchers to know, particularly if they are doing a politically charged project in a place that has more political restrictions than they are accustomed to. In places where citizens are entitled to freedom of speech, photovoice projects can be empowering for participants, and others might even encourage one to participate. However, for people living under doctrines that vehemently forbid political opposition, the act of participating in a photovoice project that has an explicit purpose to change policy could result in grave consequences. It is the researchers' ethical responsibility to become educated about the political climate in which they plan to work, and take all foreseen and possible precautions to protect the participants from any potential harm that may occur within the confines of the study.

This may limit the places in which photovoice can be implemented, or it may limit the possible

direction of a study. If members of a community in a politically sensitive climate want to do a photovoice study, they may decide to limit the scope of the research question to prevent any possible negative legal outcomes. This was the case in Yunnan Province in China in 1994 when Wang and Burris first implemented the photovoice methodology. The female participants in that study photographed health conditions that they wanted to change, but they did not discuss the political topics of domination, fear, and/or authority, which were sensitive political topics at that time. The women censored the photos so that the images contained enough evidence to support their ideas for changes in health services without being so bold that it would lead to uncertain outcomes (Wang and Burris 1997).

## Critique

Though there are numerous benefits associated with photovoice, this methodology is not immune to critique. Actually, an acute examination reveals some of the ways that participatory models, such as photovoice, may reify some of the same power relations that they attempt to resist. Despite conscious efforts to balance the power between researcher and participants, photovoice fails to fulfill the utopian ideal of equally balanced power structures. A critical examination of the language, structure, and assumptions that underscore photovoice exposes the underlying inequitable power dynamics.

In photovoice, participants are described as *marginalized* (Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain 2006), *socially invisible* (Wang, Burris, and Ping 1996), *vulnerable* (Wang and Burris 1997), excluded from political decision-making processes (Foster-Fishman et al. 2005), and *silenced* (Lykes, Blanche, and Hamber 2003). These descriptive terms suggest that the ascribed labels given to the participants reflect socially stratified relations that exist between the researcher and participants, resulting in a power differential. Thus, the

factors that influence a researcher's decision to use photovoice methodology with a particular group of people can be examined to expose the power embedded in the practice of labeling.

Despite any intended altruism, when a researcher chooses to use photovoice with a certain group of people, she inadvertently labels that group as marginalized, vulnerable, and without voice. This raises important questions to ponder such as:

- Who has the power to label?
- Do the perceived "disempowered" groups label themselves in the same way?

The ability to systematically label "others" illustrates the power that the labeler has over the labeled. These labels serve a (not-so-subtle) dualistic purpose. As they construct the participants in a specific manner, they also implicitly construct the researcher in opposition. Thus in constructing the participants as homogeneously disempowered, the researcher strategically constructs her or himself as powerful, invulnerable, and politically vocal. This oppositional stance supports the assertion that hierarchical power dynamics exist between actors within participatory models.

Regarding the research process, though, it is the participants who decide on the specific issues and questions they want to address; the researcher is the one who selects the initial topic. The researcher typically chooses a group to work with, not the other way around. Thus, by selecting that particular group as well as the topic of study, the researcher communicates her beliefs about the salient features of the perceived community. For example, in a study with seven individuals who received psychiatric treatment (Thompson et al. 2008), the researcher determined that the project would discuss issues associated with their mental health status. Perhaps if the group had had the opportunity to choose the topic themselves, they would have chosen to discuss

other issues such as access to health care or parenting difficulties. These topics may have been more salient to them than their mental health status. So even though the participants decide on the specific issues to address in relation to a given topic, it is the researcher who frames the purpose of the study, and they are expected to address issues within its parameters. In this way, the researcher reflects the participants' community onto them before they begin to reflect it back on themselves using photovoice.

Photovoice is described as empowering and emancipatory for the participants. It is important for researchers to recognize that these are possible, but not guaranteed, outcomes. It is undoubtedly more participatory, collaborative, and democratic than top-down models of research, as it includes the participants in many decision-making activities involved in the research processes. Also, the researcher has a more authoritative role than in traditional models. However, this methodology is not inherently empowering, and an imbalance of power between researcher and participants is present even in this form of participatory model. Researchers who are cognizant of this can perhaps devise strategies to have the participants make more of the key decisions that have been discussed in this section.

## Concluding Remarks

It has been almost two decades since Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris developed photovoice methodology. Having been applied to many disciplines and by various researchers has led to its evolutionary development. Retaining fidelity to the original model, the process of implementing a photovoice study can be altered in several ways to best be adapted and meet the needs of the specific group of individuals and/or community with whom it is being conducted. Drawing on several published studies, this article illustrates many variations of each step involved in the process, while providing an example of how a single study was conducted from beginning to

end. As I struggled to design my first photovoice study due to limited academic literature that discussed the research design, this article fills the gap by providing a comprehensive resource depicting options for how to design a photovoice research study. As this methodology continues to evolve parallel with our deeper understanding of photography as a communication strategy, future articles (comprehensive of the emerging adaptations) will be deemed necessary.

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## Notes

- 1 This study explored how a select group of Malian women perceive and experience empowerment in relation to their participation in a microfinance program. Microfinance describes a monetary lending system that provides people living in poverty with access to financial services to help them engage in sustainable income-generating activities. Using photovoice methodology, the participants used visual imagery and narratives to self-define empowerment and to address questions related to their perceived empowerment in the specific context of microfinance.
- 2 See Castleden and Garvin (2008) for an illustration of the easy adaptability of photovoice. The researchers used culturally relevant pedagogy to fit the general photovoice framework to the specific desires of the First Nations group with which they worked. This included inserting a feedback loop into the research design, in which they sought input from the entire community (not

only the participants) regularly throughout the project. This cultural sensitivity led to successful outcomes and it also resulted in requests from other First Nations communities for the researchers to conduct similar studies in their locale.

3 All names presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

Camille A. Sutton-Brown holds a Ph.D. in Educational Policy Studies—Research, Measurement, and Statistics from Georgia State University. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Human Economy Program, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Camille's research interests include visual methodologies, gender studies, international development, and critical pedagogy in education.

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