

The Use of Participant-Generated Photographs in Addressing Social Justice Issues among  
Research Participants

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### Introduction

One of the core social work values is the pursuit of “policies, services, and resources through advocacy and social or political actions that promote social and economic justice” (CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, 2004). Paulo Freire (1970) argues that the process of creating social change leading to social justice begins with ourselves, through a self-reflective process that is essentially a collaboration between the more and less fortunate. We believe the use of participant-generated photographs during photoelicitation interviews can be an empowering method due to the personal choice and self-reflection they foster. This method has the ability to place the research participant in a place of power and privilege by creating an opportunity to make decisions about the subject matter of their photographs that is important and meaningful to them. This method allows the voice of vulnerable groups to be heard, enables vulnerable groups to hear themselves, and can inform the social policy that directly affects the group. As Radley & Taylor (2003) alleged:

Encouraging people to take their own photographs can be justified in political terms as a way of raising consciousness about their own situation, a form of cultural action for freedom. (p. 79)

### Background

Traditional methods of quantitative research involving questionnaire surveys or experimental methods are not particularly well suited to examining the experiences or

viewpoints of vulnerable populations (Aldridge, 2007). Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, on the other hand, facilitate a democratization of the social research process where participants can share their lived experiences from their own perspectives. Research methods are techniques for gathering evidence (Harding, 1987) that, as such, are ideally open to creativity and originality. Photography is a qualitative research method that often invites creativity and the contribution of unique and unexpected data. For over a century it has involved participants in documenting their cultures in the context of sociological and anthropological research (Heisley & Levy). Appreciating difference and diversity not only applies to culture itself, but also to the research methods that contribute to our learning about those cultures.

Photoelicitation, initially described by Collier over forty years ago (Collier, 1967), refers to the use of photographs as catalysts for discussion during qualitative interviews. Although the source of photographs used during photoelicitation may be researchers, existing archival or published photography collections (Knight, S., 2000; Smith & Woodward, 1999), or research participants, in this paper we focus on participant-generated photographs. Using participant-generated photographs in the context of qualitative interviews, “provides a window into participants’ lived experience” (Frohmann, 2005) and affords advantages in conducting research with vulnerable populations such as those affected by homelessness (Hodgetts, Hadley, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2007; Klitzing, 2004), addiction (Smith & Woodward, 1999), dyslexia and learning disabilities (Aldridge, 2007; Carawan & Nalavany, 2008), cancer (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007), domestic violence (Frohmann, 2005), or lives as commercial fishers (Williams-Carawan, 2004).

Incorporating participant-generated photographs into a photo-elicitation process offers many advantages but, particularly germane to research with vulnerable or marginalized populations (Aldridge, 2007), the process can be empowering due to the situational control that resides with participants. Participants are empowered not only to identify and document images of importance to them (Williams-Carawan, 2004; Carawan & Nalavany, 2008), but also to interpret and give meaning to the images they have taken. According to Frohmann, “The photographs taken by the participant are used to shape the topics of the interview, and the participant, not the interviewer, defines what is significant and interprets its meaning” (2005, p. 1401). The process also enables others to hear the voices of and see the images made by traditionally silenced special or vulnerable populations or groups (Frohmann, 2005).

The incorporation of participant-generated photographs during photoelicitation can be advantageous as a memory trigger (Figuroa, 2008) and medium for communication that can contribute context, rich narratives, and deeper and perhaps more accessible understanding gleaned during in-depth qualitative interviews (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Carawan & Nalavany, 2008). Moreover, such use can privilege the visual capabilities of those who are less verbal (Aldridge, 2007), thus avoiding the constraints of verbal interviews (Collier, 1979). The use of participant-generated photographs during photoelicitation also can enhance participants’ sense of collaboration in the research effort, thus “assist(ing) researchers who seek to actively involve participants, including those who have been marginalized, with the research process and to make the process more enjoyable.” (Klitzing, 2004, p. 27). In the words of Harper (2002),

Photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews. It is partly due to how remembering is enlarged by photographs and partly due to the particular quality of the photograph itself.

Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk. (p. 23)

In this paper we explore photoelicitation interviews involving participant-generated photographs as a data collection method, provide examples of the method, and examine the importance of the methodology as a means of giving voice to vulnerable groups who daily face social justice issues. We employ four current studies of vulnerable populations to exemplify and explore the use of such interviews, two of which were conducted by the authors. These studies involved adults with dyslexia (Carawan & Nalavany, 2008), commercial fishermen in the rural south (Williams-Carawan, 2004), homeless people (Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005), and individuals who have learning disabilities (Aldridge, 2007).

### Adults with Dyslexia

In contrast to the more general term learning disabilities, which encompass a wide range of disorders in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and mathematics, dyslexia is the most common type of learning disability that affects approximately 10% of adults in the United States (Brown & David, 1997). A comprehensive review of the literature suggest that adults with dyslexia are vulnerable to a host of socio-emotional problems (e.g. low self-concept, frustration, anxiety, depression) and social injustices (i.e.

employment discrimination, unemployment, invalidation, and prison) (Nalavany, Carawan, & Svrjcek, 2009).

Carawan and Nalavany's (2008) study of adults with dyslexia incorporated participant-generated photographs during photoelicitation interviews wanted a "method that would have meaning to the participants, would be participatory, encourage self-reflection, and encourage the participants' voice to emerge and be heard" (p11). They argue that photoelicitation met these criteria and, consistent with researchers using similar methods (Aldridge, 2007; Collier, 1967; Douglas, 1998; Williams-Carawan, 2004;), resulted in richer and more comprehensive data than might have emerged from interviews alone.

The authors recognized that involving adults with dyslexia in research required innovative data collection methods due to the difficulties with receptive and expressive language that typify dyslexia (International Dyslexia Association, 2002). According to Mathers (2005), "people with learning disabilities respond well to methods [of visual communication] that allow them to be involved as active contributors [in research]" (p. 5). The incorporation of participant-generated photography during individual interviews capitalized on the strengths and accommodated the unique needs of this creative, visually oriented population (Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999; Wolff & Lundberg, 2002). Photography enabled participants to tell their stories by using a multisensory combination of visual, kinesthetic, and verbal language, thus affording a method effectively tailored to their strengths and needs.

The participants were invited to use disposable cameras the researchers provided or, if they preferred, their own digital cameras to "take 12 or more pictures of anything

that would help people understand your dyslexia.” The photography assignment was followed three or more weeks hence by engagement in an audio-recorded photoelicitation interview. One of the researchers initiated the interviews by randomly presenting each of the individual’s photographs and inviting the participant to talk about the image. As an organizational tool and a means of following the interview transcript, the researchers numbered each photo and often wrote words or direct quotes on the back of the image.

Participant discussions of their photographs often led to unexpected information or deeper discussions about living with dyslexia. During the interviewing process, it became clear to the researchers that the use of a prepared prompt (“How does dyslexia affect, influence, or impact you as an adult?”) was unnecessary. As Collier (1967) stated, “Photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols” and “methodologically, the only way we can use the full record of the camera is through the projective interpretation by the...(participant)” (p. 49). The unanticipated metaphors shared by participants were exemplified by one participant’s staging of the image she photographed. She had taken several photographs of strands of lights laid out in her driveway in different arrangements. To her, the lights represented sparks that signified her brain was working well. As she explained, “The spark is coming, and I’m not forgetting things.” Another participant took a photograph of an electric meter, which she described as follows:

These are Electricity Meters. These are pretty much how I am in constant tug of war of where my energy goes. Everything I do takes so much energy. What I want to do versus what I have to do to survive and I am constantly negotiating energy.

The participant-generated photographs effectively stimulated and illustrated the participants' narratives about their lived experience as adults with dyslexia. Although some photographs did not provide particular insights but collectively they added to our understanding of the lives of these participants.

### Commercial Fishing Culture

In a study of commercial fishermen, Williams-Carawan (2004) used participant-generated photos during photoelicitation interviews as a means of understanding how commercial fishermen made sense of recent changes in the fishing industry, the external forces that impacted their way of life, and their vision of the future. During the past decade, changes in the commercial fishing industry have precipitated a crisis for fishing families throughout the world. For these families, fishing is more than a job; it is a way of life. The crisis has placed the whole culture of fishing communities at risk.

Fishermen are often hesitant to be interviewed because of past negative experiences with researchers and government officials (Williams-Carawan, 2004). They spend many hours at sea either alone or with the two or three other crewmembers and often have little time on land with family and friends. In addition to a basic distrust of researchers and government officials and limited free time, the fishermen in this study had limited formal education (more than half of the fishers interviewed did not complete high school), which also may have contributed to their reluctance to participate in a research study.

At the end of an initial audio-recorded interview, the participant received a disposable camera containing film with twenty-seven frames along with a stamped and addressed box. After taking photos in response to the researcher's request to address who

they were as commercial fishermen, they mailed the camera back to the researcher. The time lapse of up to three months was much greater than the researcher had anticipated. The researcher gave one set of photos to the participant and used the second set to guide a second interview. During the second phase of the research study participants were asked to tell the researcher about their choice of each photograph and what the photo represented to them. The fishers' reflections and reactions to the photographs provided the stimulus and structure for the second interview and generated discussion about how the participants saw themselves and the context of their work.

The use of photography in this study provided a data collection method that the fishers valued and that facilitated their ability to communicate their views and experiences to the researcher. Providing them with a disposable camera to make images of their own choice offered them a way to tell their story where their voice was privileged over the voice of the researcher. The photographs focused the second interview, gave the fishermen a place to begin the interview process, and provided a tool for reflection that often led the interview to unexpected places and deeper understanding.

For example, a fisher's photograph of a fishing boat at a dock led him to share a story about the end of an era. A family who owned and operated a fish house planned to sell their business in the near future. The sale would negatively impact on the fishers who had used the dock and sold their catch to the family for many years. This information helped the researcher to "understand the fishers' feelings about urban encroachment" (p.77). Again, the use of participant-generated photographs allowed the participants to decide what was important for the researcher to understand. The power of decision-making resided with the participant; the process privileged their words. In this

example, the researcher likely would not have known to ask a question that would have elicited the information that the fisherman shared. The results of the photoelicitation interviews that incorporated participant-generated photography exemplified Geertz's "thick description" (p. 178). Ponterotto (2006) suggests that "thick description "successfully merges the participants' lived experiences with the researcher's interpretations of these experiences, thus creating thick meaning for the reader as well as for the participants and researcher." The images provided a creative path to thoughtful reflection that added an important dimension to the research.

One of the findings in the study was that the fishermen believed they had no voice in policies that affected their work and lives, thus provoking both social justice and economic justice issues. The use of participant-generated photographs during photoelicitation interviews provided an opportunity for the fishers' voices to be heard, in part, by acknowledging that they were in fact the experts in their own lives and work. For some, the reflective process of 'giving voice' to their experiences may have served as a catalyst for the first step in initiating change leading to social justice.

### Homelessness

Radley, Hodgetts, and Cullen (2005) used photoelicitation interviews to study homeless people, a particularly vulnerable population whose often-misunderstood life circumstances are complex and multi-factorial. In an effort to understand homeless culture and how these individuals "made their home" in the city, they gave them cameras and asked them to take photographs to document their life experiences. Their report focused on findings from six homeless individuals.

The first of their three-phase data collection process involved an interview exploring paths to homelessness, important life events and typical day descriptions. At the end of these interviews, participants were given cameras and asked to take images that represented their experiences of being a homeless person. Participants took their photographs during the second phase of data collection. The final phase of the study involved an audio-recorded photoelicitation interview using the participant-generated photographs that enabled participants to both show and interpret the world of homelessness.

According to the authors, the use of the camera gave participants a way to “turn upon their environment and to provide an account of how and why they did so” (p.277). Participants told their stories through photographs coupled with the narratives that their images elicited. The researchers explained that their “aim was not so much an understanding of the pictures, as an understanding *with* the photographs about the lives of the respondents concerned” (p.278). For this population the use of participant-generated photography was particularly effective strategy since, according to the researchers, they were “studying not just ‘the identities of the homeless’ but the practical ways in which they endorse, maintain and repair the effects of their social and material situation” (p. 293).

### Learning Disabilities

In a study that examined the benefits of social and therapeutic horticulture (STH), Aldridge (2007) used photoelicitation as a data collection strategy believing that the strategy fit the needs of vulnerable individuals such as those with learning disabilities. The researcher sought ways “in which people with learning disabilities can be included in

social research more effectively and in ways that have meaning for them, (and) are participatory in intent” (p. 3). She wanted to use a research method that addressed what she saw as exclusion and marginalization for individuals with learning disabilities. The objective of the research study was to gain insight into the four dimensions of social exclusion: consumption, production, social interaction, and political engagement (Burchardt et al. (2002). In some cases Aldridge (2007) had to gain permission from parents or guardians for participants whose cognitive capacities were limited. The difficulty in finding a data collection method to use with this population is apparent.

After gaining permission, the researcher gave participants cameras and asked them to photograph their on site gardening projects. In a subsequent photoelicitation interview, the researcher requested that participants choose their favorite images and talk about those particular photographs. The author found that the use of participant-generated photography demonstrated usefulness as a research method because it offered the participant’s point of view, emphasized the strengths of the vulnerable group rather than pathology, emphasized “the positive, inclusive advantages of using such a technique, particularly for the participants themselves” (p.12), and was inclusive because it enabled those with learning disabilities to be more engaged in the research process. Aldridge concluded that social researchers must learn to be flexible with their methods in order to accommodate and include vulnerable groups in research (2007).

### Conclusion

Understanding and respecting difference is not just about our knowledge of various cultures but also about how we approach our research with different groups to learn about their cultures. Research methods that fit with the population that we want to

learn about are especially important when working with vulnerable groups. As Aldridge (2007) contends, “the methods used (with vulnerable populations) must ... be faithful, not simply in representing or interpreting experience, but in presenting or illustrating it” (p. 13). The presentation interview challenges researchers to represent participants’ views and voices with fidelity. We suggest that participants’ photographs cannot and should not stand alone, but rather should be coupled with participants’ interpretations of their photographs when presenting findings.

Participant-produced photos can be undertaken before an initial in-depth interview, enhancing participants’ readiness to be interviewed (Olliffe & Bottoroff, 2007), or introduced during one interview and discussed during a subsequent interview. It is the interview that is a critical accompaniment to such photographs since the images alone cannot be interpreted by researchers or others in ways consistent with meanings intended by participants. As Figueroa (2008) contends, a photograph is “an image (that) can be seen as the tip of the iceberg. It is open to multiple interpretations” (p. 76). Discussion, therefore, is needed to elicit meaning from the perspective of the participant who made the image. It is photoelicitation interviewing that provides the context for understanding these photographic images. In addition, giving participants the opportunity to indicate their feedback to a draft or findings is another way of honoring and respecting participants’ role in the research process. The draft must, however, be tailored in a way that participants find accessible and understandable. Researchers might, for example, consider submitting a verbal summary of research findings offered by means of a telephone or face-to-face follow-up conversation.

The research studies presented in this paper have a number of commonalities. For

example, the researchers searched for methods that would better fit with the characteristics of the proposed research population. More traditional methods are not always suited for vulnerable populations particularly for those who have low literacy or have expressive difficulties. These researchers indicate that participant-generated photography and photoelicitation provided unique and unexpected findings with exceptional depth. As researchers they believe that they learned something from the participants that they would not have learned without the use of participant generated photographs. The photos created the ability to draw the researcher into the world of the participant. In most cases the combination of participant-generated photography and photoelicitation served as a catalyst for bringing forth the participant's deeper story. Again and again, researchers believed that participants found the process to be enjoyable and interesting and that participants were in control of their story. The participants communicated that they felt their contributions were valued.

We do not propose that this is a method that could or should be used with all people. We do however; believe that it is a method that can work with at least some vulnerable populations. The resulting photographs and narratives have the potential to heighten awareness and serve as a catalyst for professional and public policy intervention regarding social justice issues for these groups.

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