**PARTICIPATORY VISUAL METHODS: AN INTRODUCTION**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

Many researchers utilize visual media—such as photos, videos, drawings, and artefacts—to explore research questions. In addition, many researchers utilize participatory methods in which they collaborate with participants to design, to plan, to initiate, to conduct, and to interpret the research. Participatory visual methods combine these approaches. That is, when researchers utilize participatory visual methods, they use visual media collaboratively with participants to enable these individuals to express their perspectives, concerns, and opinions more effectively. The following table outlines two of the most common variants of participatory visual methods

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| Approach | Comparable techniques or synonyms | Description |
| Photovoice | * Video diaries * Participative voice * Photo-narratives * Photo-novellas | * Participants use a camera to record their lives * They often complement these stills or videos with audio narratives * The participants are thus granted an opportunity to show people how they perceive their lives and society * Other visual media are possible, such as painting, drawing, and sculpting |
| Visual elicitation |  | * Researchers utilize photos, videos, artefacts, and other objects to elicit memories during interviews |

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| **Photovoice and video diaries** |

Typically, researchers utilize photovoice and video diaries to grant participants an opportunity to show people their lives with photos, videos, or other visual media rather than words. Often, the participants are individuals who are marginalized. This research grants these individuals opportunities to express their concerns or demonstrate injustices. Photovoice and video diaries enable individuals to convey the strengths or concerns of their community, to initiate discussion about the issues these photos or videos represent, and to persuade governments and other stakeholders that change is essential. Photovoice is not merely a photo album—but a sequence of photos or clips that are intended to narrate a story and persuade stakeholders.

**Instructions and encouragement**

Before they use cameras to record their lives, participants are likely to receive a range of instructions (see Meager, 2017). The following table illustrates some of these instructions.

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| Topic | Example |
| Range | * Individuals may be instructed to video a range of settings, such as work, home, and recreation. This technique is especially applicable if one of these settings is unusual or risky but the other settings are typical. For instance, they might dress in unusual costumes during recreation but live a conventional life at work and home. |
| Movement | * In general, individuals should hold the frame, rather than shift the camera too often or rapidly, to observe the events that unfold within this frame * But occasionally individuals should then move the camera or themselves to follow an object of interest |
| Sound | * Individuals should wear headphones to monitor the sounds the camera was recording * They should utilize external cardioid microphones to record sounds in front of the camera and, to a lesser, to the side of this camera |
| Encouragement | * Individuals should photograph, video, or draw without judging themselves to often * But, if they do not feel they are progressing, they can be encouraged to attempt other media. |
| Visibility | * The participants should not record anyone furtively but should acknowledge their endeavors |
| Editing | * Sometimes, the participants work with the researchers to decide which clips to include and exclude as well as the order of these clips |

**Examples**

To clarify how photovoice, video diaries, and similar techniques can be utilized, you should read many examples in which this approach was applied. The following table summarises a few examples.

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| Authors | Example |
| Brooks et al. (2017) | * The aim of this study was to appreciate the perspectives of rural communities in South Africa on mortality that stems from HIV. |
| McIntyre (2003) | * This study utilized photovoice to explore how a community of working-class women, living in Belfast, experience and perceive the places in which they live * At the end, they developed an exhibit, comprising a sequence of photos with text, to communicate their perspectives |
| Young & Barrett (2001) | * Street children in Kampala were granted the opportunity to utilize photo diaries, drawings, mental maps, and timelines to convey their lives. |

**Benefits**

Construal level theory offers some insight into the benefits of these visual methods (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). When researchers utilize photovoice and video diaries, potential stakeholders—such as government departments—are exposed to vivid depictions of the lives and experiences of people who experience hardship rather than written reports. When exposed to vivid sensory details, people tend to perceive these events as closer in time (Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010). These issues seem more immediate and thus pressing. Stakeholders are more likely to initiate action sooner rather than later.

Furthermore, according to the fluency bias (e.g., Labroo, Lambotte, & Zhang, 2009), information that can be interpreted rapidly and fluently is more likely to be perceived as important, valid, and favourable. Stakeholders, such as government officials, tend to interpret photos and videos more fluently and rapidly than written reports. Consequently, photos and videos may be more persuasive.

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| **Visual elicitation** |

Sometimes, during interviews, the researcher will utilize photos, diagrams, drawings, videos, toys, artefacts, and other objects to elicit memories and thus enrich the answers. The following table outlines the benefits and drawbacks of this approach.

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| Benefits of visual elicitation | Drawbacks of visual elicitation |
| * People may be more willing to converse about these images or objects instead of the actual events * That is, they can project their emotions onto this object. * So, painful emotions or unpleasant memories feel as if they reside in the object, diminishing the intensity of these feelings * Individuals may thus be more willing to converse about upsetting events | * The objects might distort the memories of individuals, generating inaccurate answers * The objects might bias attention to considerations that were not especially important * The objects might elicit memories the participant wanted to suppress—and thus could evoke strong, unpleasant feelings |

In one variant, called auto-driving, the participants chose the photos or objects themselves. They can thus decide which topics they want to explore.

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| **Ethical considerations and other controversies** |

Participatory visual methods, especially photovoice and video diaries, can raise a range of ethical considerations. After all, the participants assume the role of researchers, in one sense, but may not have received the requisite training in ethics. The following table illustrates some of the ethical principles that researchers should apply.

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| Topic | Example |
| Confidentiality of participants | * Often, ethics committees prefer that data, especially if derived from members of disadvantaged communities, should be confidential * Yet, in participatory visual methods, the participants and their families often want their narratives to be broadcast. * For example, they might want government bodies to be aware of their plights. |
| Consent | * Nevertheless, participants should be asked whether they consent to the use of their films in various outlets, such as conferences or documentaries * If the participants are children, researchers should seek consent from caregivers and assent from the children * The participants or researchers should also seek consent from everyone who is depicted in a photo or video |

Besides ethical considerations, participatory visual methods raise other controversies. For example

* Some of the methods, such as visual elicitation, are not especially participatory. That is, the participants are not really granted an opportunity to shape the research question, procedures, and outcomes
* Scholars have not forged a consensus on the protocols that researchers should apply when they conduct this approach (Literat, 2013)
* Researchers are not quite certain how to interpret videos, photos, or drawings—although applying a range of methods could diminish the likelihood of misconstrued interpretations (Young & Barrett, 2001). Furthermore, whenever possible, verbal interviews or narratives should complement visual methods
* Researchers often misconstrue the videos, photos, and drawbacks of participants from other cultures, because they do not understand the significance of some objects (Young & Barrett, 2001)

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