

Pictures, patience, and practicalities: lessons learned from using photovoice in applied communication contexts

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ABSTRACT

The unforeseen trials of arts-based research may suppress creative and innovative explorations. Photovoice, a visual method of investigation employing participatory photography, presents a host of apprehensions. Yet, photovoice is both a valid and rich methodology that can greatly expand the reach and scope of applied communication research. In this essay, we – three applied communication researchers – discuss the complexities of photovoice, highlighting areas of consideration that interested researchers should contemplate before utilizing this methodology. Briefly exploring three of our research studies and their varying topics (i.e. long-term cancer survivors, domestic violence organizational advocacy, male body culture), we discuss three broad areas of difficulty in photovoice research: analysis, control, and exposure. Despite the unique obstacles that photovoice presents, we argue that it, along with other forms of arts-based research, are profitable and definitely worth the challenge.

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Take a mental snapshot of your life. If a picture is really worth a thousand words, what do those words say about you? As qualitative researchers, we are very familiar with words, but when it comes to images, we are less prepared to engage. Images are messy. Ask people to *visually document* their lives and a host of concerns emerge. *What are the ethical implications of those images? How do you manage such a data set?* And perhaps most worrisome – *how do you make sense of those images?*

Despite our apprehensions, we wholeheartedly embraced visual research methods through *photovoice*, a methodology for understanding the social world through the eyes of those experiencing it. Photovoice involves participatory photography and the integration of photographs into the research process (Harper, 2002). As the name suggests, photovoice puts cameras in the hands of research participants so they can document their reality. Further, photovoice is designed to highlight marginalized others' 'voices' to better comprehend how they understand and navigate their worlds.

While the specifics vary across studies, the method's foundation is the integration of photography into the research process, typically accompanied by interviews or focus

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groups. These (auto)ethnographic and photographic endeavors are situated in the wider spectrum of arts-based research; that is, research mixed with aesthetic components (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2009). Arts-based research is arguably underutilized in Communication Studies and thus its potential often goes unrealized. As social justice-oriented, feminist communication researchers, we find photovoice to be a wonderful addition to our methodological toolkits. Moreover, the textual and visual data inspire us to embrace multigenre representations that blur the boundaries of art and social science, reaching audiences outside the academy and enhancing our studies' validity (Ellingson, 2009).

A cornerstone of photovoice methodology is its emancipatory potential. Recognizing that social positionality influences perspective, much photovoice research has involved members of marginalized groups, including women (Frohmann, 2005), minorities (Douglas, 1998), LGBTQ-identified individuals (Santurri, 2014), those with health disparities (Hagerdorn, 1990), and the elderly (Baker & Wang, 2006). Photovoice is closely aligned with feminist research as it 'recognizes and values the subjective experiences of those involved, gives members of the community control over how their lives are represented ... and is an approach that explicitly seeks to advance progressive social change' (Osei-Kofi, 2013, p. 140).

Our photovoice journeys

The three of us, hell-bent on advancing progressive social change, embarked on photovoice journeys. Laura used photovoice to document the daily lives of long-term cancer survivors. Adrienne attempted to use the method to document survivors' experiences following domestic violence (DV). And Phil used the method to see how men perceive masculinity and fitness. Our results ranged significantly, but they all reveal some of the rewards, challenges, and frustrations of photovoice. Below, we briefly describe our projects. We then offer some lessons we have learned along the way.

Laura's journey

Awareness of the ways in which researchers' facility with language is often not shared by participants who have much to teach us (e.g. Harter and Associates, 2013) motivated me to try photovoice, as did my goal of crystallizing research (Ellingson, 2009). My own experiences as a long-term survivor of bone cancer living with 'late effects' (a term I did not learn until I had suffered from late effects for more than a decade) inspired me to reach out to fellow survivors. My research assistant and I focused on the experiences of long-term survivors of cancer (5–30+ years post-treatment) who live with late effects, or the physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual damage caused by chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, and other cancer treatments (e.g. chronic pain, depression, impaired memory, PTSD, neuropathy, infertility, heart disease; Kirchhoff et al., 2014). While cultural discourse surrounding cancer has developed significantly over the past generation, most people remain unaware of the realities of living post-cancer treatment (Borofka, Boren, & Ellingson, 2015).

We recruited long-term cancer survivors and invited them to use either a disposable camera or their own camera. We directed participants to take photos of their everyday

lives as survivors for one month. When reviewing participants' photos, we were initially confused as to how some of the events depicted could have taken place within the allotted time period. Some photos were what we expected, that is, recent pictures of families, friends, churches, landscapes, and medications. Yet many of the digital photos clearly had *not* been taken during the month of the study but captured cherished moments, such as weddings, vacations, awards, and children's milestones. This unanticipated result challenged us to reflect on the ways in which we had expected participants to follow our instructions rather than to make sense of photovoice processes in ways that were meaningful in the context of participants' lives. Ultimately, participants' creativity taught us about the place of significant memories and milestones in helping survivors to live fully while suffering from late effects.

Adrienne's journey

As part of a larger study (D'Enbeau & Kunkel, 2013) that examined the structure of, and inherent tensions within, a DV organization, Dr. Jennifer Guthrie and I thought photovoice would provide us with a way to highlight the voices of DV survivors. We trained and volunteered at a local DV shelter for approximately three years and then began examining survivors' notions of DV, empowerment, and social support. Our plan was to interview survivors, provide them with disposable cameras, and ask them to spend a week capturing their interpretations of empowerment, hope, freedom, and survival. We had wanted to compile photos and conduct focus groups with survivors. We even envisioned a Domestic Violence Awareness Month exhibit at a local gallery.

I interviewed the first 11 of 28 survivors and gave them disposable cameras, making sure they knew how to work them, as well as what we expected them to do. I offered examples such as a bird to represent 'freedom' or a ladder to represent 'empowerment.' After her week passed, I attempted to contact the survivor to retrieve her camera. This is when our photovoice design went awry. Finding survivors was unexpectedly difficult and logistics for meeting them to pick up cameras were intricate. Then the first survivor dropped her camera in a pool. The second survivor had no idea where she put her camera. The third survivor's child decided to 'play with' the camera. Frustrated yet persistent, I secured a box at the shelter labelled, 'PLEASE RETURN YOUR CAMERAS FOR THE RESEARCH HERE.' In the end, I acquired two of 11 cameras. The first camera was void of photographs, and the second contained blurry images. We reluctantly decided to conduct remaining interviews without photovoice.

I was disappointed and felt that we had failed with the photovoice component of our research. I had to let go of my idealistic dream of survivors proudly displaying their photographs in an exhibit. Nonetheless, Kunkel and Guthrie (2016) answer valuable theoretical and practical questions about how DV survivors tell their stories and navigate tensions as they emancipate from their abusers. Did we succeed? It depends on how you define success.

Phil's journey

I'm a risk-taker by nature. Tell me how to do something 'the right way,' and I will try it every way but. I see methodology as more of a suggestion and think that 'playing with' our

research is a way to stretch the discipline and open up new conversations about research. So, of course, when I started a photovoice project, I just *had to* do something different.

Driven by a significant weight loss (from 365 to 225 pounds), I sought to understand how men understand their bodies in fitness spaces. Contrary to photovoice's focus on the marginalized, I tasked 'fit' men with capturing their experiences visually. My participants were all cisgender, overwhelmingly heterosexual, mostly white, and all middle class, educated, and possessive of what they deemed a 'fit body' – all positions of power. I took a risk but validated my exploration in that it did not further contribute to epistemological ghettos – spaces formed around 'morally critical, socially visible, or factually exotic populations, spaces, and behaviors' (Brekhus, 1998, p. 38). While I could have examined the exotified bodies in male fitness culture (i.e. fat, trans*, differently abled, etc.), I wanted other men *like me* to recognize how privilege was etched on their (fit) bodies and how oppression might emanate *from* those same bodies.

I collected data from 30 participants, gathered over 550 images, and coded 672 pages of interview data related to those images – a qualitative researcher's dream/nightmare. My findings implicated male body culture as a site for the production of hegemonic masculinities, oppressive mechanisms, and both self- and other-directed body shame. The results were rich, but only one facet of the study.

Perhaps the most interesting finding was the way photovoice emerged as a way to interrupt learned (hetero)sexism, homophobia, and other oppressive mechanisms. My study confirmed that photovoice has the potential to visualize power in such a way that even those who possess it cannot deny (Wagner, in press). Fat-shaming, sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism emerged as significant themes, often catching participants off guard. For them, the connection was not immediately obvious, but the *thousand words* their pictures told led them on journeys of critical self-reflection.

Lessons learned

Photovoice affirms that qualitative research, while rewarding, can be complicated, messy, and frustrating. We expect that others, like us, might be lured by the great potentials without regard to the difficulties of utilizing arts-based methods. Thus, we highlight several issues researchers must consider before jumping into a photovoice project. Hopefully the lessons we learned will inspire others to pursue similar projects with a more informed perspective. Below, we present three areas of consideration – analysis, control, and exposure.

Analysis

The saying goes, 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' As applied communication researchers, we are well poised to analyse those *words*, but what do we do with the images? In photovoice projects, photos are embedded within interviews; points of reference for the surrounding explanations. Yet, those images also hold rich content that we were eager to analyse. We quickly realized that photos should not be analysed the same way interview transcripts are. They are referent points for the multigenre representation of our research topic, yet we lack consistent guidelines for how to treat images as

independent artifacts. Furthermore, what if the images and the surrounding discourse contradict each other?

Because Phil's project focused on male bodies, you can imagine the raised eyebrows at some of the images. In the midst of hundreds of shirtless selfies, men also captured images of weapons and violence. Given that these men were charged with capturing what it means to be 'a man pursuing fitness,' those images stood out, telling a troubling tale of the relationship between fitness, masculinity, and violence. Yet when Phil probed in interviews, many disagreed – they were *not* violent. What is a researcher to do with contradictions? The absence of formal procedures for visual analysis presents unique challenges. Do we put on our rhetorician hats? Brush up on art history? Cross disciplines or develop new procedures within our own?

Control

As reflexive scholars, we acknowledge that we are all control freaks. More than a few researchers of our acquaintance privately admit to being control freaks as well. On the one hand, being obsessive has helped us succeed at organizing, conducting, and completing numerous research projects. On the other, even as feminist scholars who believe in sharing power and regarding participants as co-researchers, surrendering control is even tougher than we anticipated.

Know that the unexpected will occur; prepare to be surprised. As Laura conducted interviews about participants' initial cancer diagnoses, treatment, and late effects, she found that images demonstrated a mix of 'special moments' along with more mundane photos. These mixed results made it difficult to categorize participants' experiences, but this initial frustration dissipated as a respect for participants' sense making and a deep fascination with their stories grew. Ultimately, a shift in the research questions led to more meaningful interpretations of the data.

Adrienne and her colleague thought using photovoice would be an empowering process that would highlight DV survivors' voices. They assumed the thrill of capturing images of 'hope,' 'survival,' and 'empowerment,' along with the promise of creating a public art exhibit of survivors' photos, would motivate participants to capture the experiences of DV. But survivors of DV have already overcome numerous obstacles; thus the camera, in this instance, emerged as just *another object* they had no time for. Regardless of outcome, using new methods reveals a lot about who we are as researchers. We discovered we like to be in 'control' of our data. Photovoice is not friendly to a researcher's need for control. Instead, we advocate for using areas of divergence as places to interrogate the deeper meanings of lived experience.

Exposure

Photovoice is a vulnerable endeavor. Participants' images can be deeply emotional and symbolic. Ideally, those images set the stage for rich discourse about lived experience. But photovoice is not only a moment of vulnerability for participants – it is also one for researchers as well. Vulnerability and reflexivity are necessary components of our work. Still, we have careers and want to produce research that is well received. Because little photovoice research has been published in Communication Studies, a certain level

of risk comes with the territory. Trying ‘new’ methods is both personally and professionally demanding. We are trained researchers – some of us have even helped expand disciplinary thinking about qualitative methods (e.g. Ellingson, 2009; Manning & Kunkel, 2014) – yet we also admit that it is uncomfortable and sometimes embarrassing to feel so uncertain about making sense of data.

Our comments on control reveal some of the personal vulnerabilities that researchers may face, but a certain level of professional vulnerability exists as well. We were hard pressed to find many published photovoice works in Communication Studies, especially in top journals. At the time of submitting this essay, the search term ‘photovoice’ yielded only 17 results in the *Communication and Mass Media Complete* database. For junior academics, like Phil, the seemingly oppositional marketplace for photovoice research renders him professionally vulnerable. His experiences validate this. Despite significant interest in his research, he has received numerous desk rejections simply because it ‘doesn’t fit the scope’ of journals.

Worth it?

Despite our obstacles, we ardently proclaim that photovoice is a worthwhile endeavor. By sharing our experiences, our goal is not to dissuade others; in fact, we hope for just the opposite. We sought to provide a realistic glimpse into photovoice research. We hope to *speak to* and *with* the discipline in hopes that we might encourage more photovoice research. We invite others to look past the looming obstacles and see the practical, theoretical, and emancipatory potentials of engaging in photovoice research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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