Transforming Research Methods in the Social Sciences

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Introduction

In this chapter we explore the use of Photovoice methodologies for working in marginalised contexts in South Africa. Photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR) method through which members of a community come together in a facilitated process to produce stories of change in and about their communities. The stories are based on photographs accompanied by captions or longer narratives created by the participants in Photovoice projects. Drawing from our experiences as psychologists working with communities in the Western Cape, we provide some practical examples of how Photovoice can promote empowerment, critical consciousness and social capital in marginalised communities oppressed by unequal access to resources. The groups in question are very varied and examples are drawn from our work with individuals in the street-based sex trade, young black women who identify as lesbian and bisexual, black students in higher education, and learners living in areas with high levels of gang violence. As an approach rooted in PAR, the potential benefits of Photovoice projects are largely determined by the possibilities and constraints of community participation. This is often dependent on contextual issues, the characteristics of the communities involved, and the roles and responsibilities taken on by researchers. All of these components are intrinsically tied to how projects are designed, implemented and sustained and the degree to which they can contribute to policy shifts and social change.

Background

The current wave of student movements in South African universities has brought to the surface the need for social science research that is relevant to a rapidly changing society. Fuelled by the imperatives of decolonisation, questions of knowledge production and research practices that have an explicit agenda of social change and social justice are becoming critical sites of debate for transforming our work in the context of a postcolonial society. This chapter looks at the role of Photovoice as a theory–method that can provide a powerful tool and process for a social justice framework by disrupting the epistemological violence often produced
and exercised against people and places that are researched. As a PAR method, Photovoice acts as an interlocutor between knowledge projects and lived experience. It engages people to participate in the changes they want to see take place in their environments by taking an active and ownership role in the research process.

The process of participation has been a key concern for psychological research (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). Power relations between researchers and participants, between participants themselves, and between participants and other stakeholders in the broader environment of a research project all mediate the possibilities for participatory work to have its intended effects. Working with communities that are marginalised from access to resources means that participation must have an empowerment and awareness-raising function, giving people a voice that is heard and recognised in their social environment (Seedat, Suffla & Bawa, 2015). In this chapter, we present what we mean by participation, empowerment, critical consciousness and social capital as the key conceptual tools guiding PAR projects, followed by a description of the Photovoice process and practical examples drawn from our work with marginalised groups in Cape Town and its surrounding areas. In doing so, we highlight the sociopsychological dimensions of Photovoice that are particularly appealing, such as the role of representation, recognition and affect, which not only contribute to strengthening participatory forms of work but may also shed light on the imperative of decolonising the social sciences in South Africa.

Participation, empowerment, critical consciousness and social capital

Since the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and the emergence of a democratic dispensation, participation in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the nation is a right for all citizens as enshrined in various ways in the Constitution and marked by the first democratic election in 1994. Hence, in the process of decolonisation, we see participation as a political process that challenges the oppressive structures and lived experiences of disenfranchised groups. However, participation is not simply the ability to cast a vote. As witnessed in the last 21 years of democracy, change has been slow and much inequality and discrimination has persisted. Thus, to better understand the possibilities and limitations of participation, we must engage with the more intricate ways in which some people remain excluded from access to resources whilst others retain their wealth and privilege. Power relations between people and between groups on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, ability and sexual orientation, amongst others, are played out in ways that mediate people’s ability to participate in society and the decisions that impact on their lives. On a more global scale, power relations between nations also mediate the extent to which democratic governments can exercise their autonomy and meet the demands and needs of their citizens, which has an impact on local contexts (Campbell, 2006). PAR seeks to disrupt these power processes in ways that promote the participation and control of individuals and groups over their lives, and where participation is the power to represent...
oneself (Howarth, Andreouli & Kessi, 2014) and to gain recognition and access to the resources needed for change. Nevertheless, people are generally not immediately aware of what needs to change and how to go about it. Hence, a participatory process is also one in which people’s daily lives are discussed, solutions are debated and action is taken towards particular goals. Empowerment, raising critical consciousness and building social capital are three mechanisms that bring together the social and psychological tools to enable this process to unfold (Table 22.1).

### Table 22.1 Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Both an individual psychological state and a social process. It is a mechanism by which individuals and communities are inspired to act towards social justice, are engaged in activities that promote their well-being, and feel confident and in control of their lives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical consciousness</td>
<td>A process of action and reflection to understand how individuals are shaped by the social context in which they live and how this context impacts on their daily realities. Through this process, individuals develop a realistic understanding of the possibilities and limitations of change and use their imagination towards creative acts of resistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital</td>
<td>This refers to levels of trust and reciprocity in the community and common norms and beliefs. These can exist through interpersonal relationships or community groups and associations and are indicative of the levels of participation in communities.</td>
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</tbody>
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*Source: Authors*

Through empowerment, critical consciousness and social capital, PAR engages participants to represent their experiences and become involved in social action in a context where they are being recognised by others and where they begin to see themselves as agents of change in their communities.

### Photovoice as PAR

Photovoice is a particular PAR technique that seeks to apply the above concepts and methods with groups of participants from various communities. The attractiveness of Photovoice is the use of photographs and audio or written captions as a way of collecting the narratives of people’s lived experiences. In a typical Photovoice project, researcher and participants come together to discuss their day-to-day lives, focusing on aspects of their environment and circumstances that they see as limiting and/or enabling their participation in social life. The researcher facilitating the process in consultation with the participants may choose to focus on a specific theme (e.g. experiences of selling sex) or take a broader approach (e.g. what are the assets and challenges in your community?), depending on the aims of the research and the priorities articulated by the participants involved.
Participants are then given cameras and trained in some basic photography techniques and theory – framing, lighting, composition/how to represent ideas and experiences in a photograph. Once participants have a good grasp of how to use the cameras and ideas on what photographs and stories they wish to tell, they are given a set timeframe in which to take their photographs. On regrouping, participants present to each other the photographs they have taken and share the stories they wish to convey. In these sessions, participants are probed for more information or explanation on the circumstances or causes that led to their story. This process may lead them to take more or different photographs and to modify their captions until they feel they have reached a final production. Once completed, the photographs and captions are showcased in a photography exhibition open to the public, where emphasis is placed on raising general awareness and inviting key stakeholders whom participants may not ordinarily have access to. The exhibition is a central component of the process and aims to raise awareness and sensitise the public to the priorities articulated by participants. It is also a celebratory moment to recognise the knowledge, capabilities and creative skills of the photographers and how they have contributed to change. The Photovoice impact model illustrated in Figure 22.1 depicts how this process unfolds from the initial photography training, the cyclical nature of the critical discussions of stories documented through photographs, and the envisaged impact on participants marked by increased levels of critical consciousness, social capital and empowerment.

**Figure 22.1 Photovoice impact model**

How does this process challenge power and promote social justice?

The following examples are drawn from Photovoice projects that we, as staff members of the University of Cape Town (UCT) Psychology Department, have been involved in.¹ These projects reflect on how power relations can be disrupted in Photovoice research projects and lead to the production of new knowledge, ultimately espousing a social justice agenda. In discussing these projects,
we demonstrate concrete ways in which critical consciousness, empowerment and social capital are put into practice.

**Case 1: Experiences of black students at UCT**

This Photovoice project explored daily experiences of black students from diverse racial and gendered backgrounds at UCT. The project was initially inspired by the need to address racialising discourses of low standards attributed to black students in anti-affirmative action campaigns, but through the students’ voices, the project evolved into a broader focus on a decolonised university. The project started in 2013 following the affirmative action debate at UCT and before the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement emerged. It lasted until the end of 2015, the year that the statue of Cecil John Rhodes was removed from the campus. In the first focus groups, participants were asked to share their views on UCT’s affirmative action policy and how the negative depictions of black students may have affected them. This was a way of leading them into a conversation about their experiences, which then evolved into a discussion on what is meant by transformation in higher education spaces. As the project evolved, subsequent groups were asked to explain what was meant by ‘black pain’ (a term often used in the 2015 student movements) and to share their views on what a decolonised university might look like.

During the discussion groups, participants spoke about their common experiences of exclusion at UCT, mostly enacted by other students and staff, and built a network of solidarity amongst themselves. One participant noted, for example, that you have, ‘black people are stupid’ or ‘why do we actually allow them to come to universities?’ Now with all these debates, race-based policies, even if you try not to think about it they still really affect you.

Also, through guided facilitation, participants explored the possible causes of their situation and spoke about the whiteness and patriarchal nature of institutional culture and symbols, the Eurocentrism of the curriculum, and the lack of black staff in academic positions. As one student pointed out:

> Our curriculum is still from a western perspective. You look at most of the lecturers we have, I’m a third-year student at UCT and I’ve not been taught by somebody who’s black or someone who’s of another colour.

These discussions were empowering as they encouraged students to move away from a victim-blaming approach that located their feelings of alienation as something that existed inside them as individuals (low standards), towards explanations that had to do with the limitations of the institutional environment.

The photography exhibitions and subsequent public presentations about the project raised awareness amongst other students, staff and, in particular, senior members of management whom the students would not usually have access to — and subsequently led to many debates amongst students, academics and decision-makers in the institution, particularly in the context of the RMF movement. During the exhibition, participants also had the opportunity to present their work and speak about their experiences of the project to the audience,
thereby gaining recognition for their work and experiencing themselves as agents of change in their community.

Through the telling of stories and the different elements of the project, participants challenged power dynamics in terms of interpersonal relations (with students and staff) and structural power processes (institutional symbols and culture), and felt empowered by being heard and seen through their own representations and through having control and ownership of the process. The photo-story in Figure 22.2, about the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on UCT campus, is a powerful illustration of the impact that cultural symbols such as artefacts and language can have on black students and how the reification of these is disempowering and channelled through their relationships with white students.

**Figure 22.2 Statue of Cecil John Rhodes on UCT campus**

Standing in front of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, I still felt the power of the colonisers on my colonised forefathers and myself in contemporary South Africa. In taking the picture, I was still positioned in a lower position of both the statue and my white fellow students standing next to the statue. This elevated their position in relation to me, and the Jammie stairs was a metaphor for the upward mobility of black people and how that meant that whiteness or the colonisers’ position needs to be aspired to. The fact that I adjust my accent and continuously refine my English is a reflection of this and the black person’s positionality in this institution.
Case 2: Young black women representing their identities

This work engaged a group of young black isiXhosa-speaking women aged between 13 and 17 years from a semi-rural, working-class community about 70 kilometres outside Cape Town. They identified as lesbian and bisexual and were invited to explore their experiences and identities. The participatory nature of the project was essential to work against dominant representations of young people in the work on sexuality and gender, especially work that represents black lesbian women through the lens of ‘risk’ and victimhood. Over a number of weeks, the participants discussed their lives as young women who identify as lesbian and bisexual in their particular community and developed photo-stories relating to their experiences, including violence and discrimination experienced at school and in the community. During the group discussions participants were asked to think about the stories they would like to tell about their lives and how they might represent these through photography. A professional photographer provided photography training and accompanied them on a photographic excursion to practise their skills and plan their photo-stories. They were given a camera for one week, engaged in group discussions about their photographs after taking them and produced a written narrative to accompany their stories. They were also interviewed individually (Figure 22.3).

Figure 22.3 Being a lesbian is not a curse
I . . . believe that being a lesbian is not a curse and I will grow up a lesbian, I am proud of my personality, I feel comfortable when I am wearing like a boy, I hate wearing skirts, even at school I wear boys’ trousers.

The method allowed the young women to discuss their experiences of violence and discrimination in a safe space but also to foreground their agency by highlighting the many ways in which they resisted and challenged the discriminatory practices they encountered (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015). In the quotes that follow, participants talk about the expectations others have of them to display ‘appropriate’ femininity through their clothing and style of dress and how they challenge these expectations.

Like, I first . . . told my mum . . . when we go shopping . . . , like go and buy clothes, like my mother showed me some dresses and skirts and . . . I said no mommy man, I don’t like it. I just want shorts and my mother, that’s when . . . she realised like, Akhona [pseudonym] what are you actually? I told my mother I am this person and I am a lesbian and then my mother asked, she wanted to see my girlfriend then, we went then.

. . . as long as both my parents leave me to wear boys’ clothes and they accept me as their child I thank them and I’m proud. I’m proud because they supported me and I’m proud being a lesbian, no one can stop me, no one can change me. If she/he loves me, she will love me the way I am.

Another participant wrote a photo-story in which she spoke about discrimination at school and the expectations from her teachers that she wear an ‘appropriate’ uniform for a girl. In Figure 22.4, we see her providing some resistance to this expectation by wearing the dress with takkies (sports shoes) and long grey socks, as well as turning her back to the camera.

The group discussions also facilitated the development of a critical consciousness about the effects of patriarchal and heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality in their lives and relationships. The young women ran an exhibition of their photo-stories in their local community and used this as a further opportunity to raise awareness and challenge oppressive practices amongst friends, family and teachers. They were empowered through taking ownership of the public exhibition of their work (Figure 22.5) and using it as an opportunity to springboard further dialogues and awareness-raising in their schools, communities and beyond. Participants were also invited to present a workshop about their experiences to students training as teachers at a local university.
At the school we don’t feel well because some of the teachers are very homophobic people. At school I am wearing the grey, I don’t wear the uniform/skirt because I don’t feel comfortable when I’m wearing skirt.

Overall, the narratives and photographs the young women produced and their experiences of participation worked to counteract dominant objectifying narratives of victimhood about them and their lives as young, black, lesbian women living in a South African township (Zway & Boonzaier, 2015).

**Case 3: Through the lens of marginalised women**

Despite South Africa’s comprehensive human rights Constitution, human rights violations continue to occur daily. Women, particularly black women, are the most vulnerable to these violations, and poverty and oppression often mean that selling sex becomes one of the few alternatives for earning money. Women
selling sex are frequently stigmatised and ostracised from their communities. This can lead to a disempowered sense of worthlessness and ‘victimhood’ (Learmonth, Hakala & Keller, 2015).

This Photovoice project involved eight black women from a non-governmental organisation which advocates for legal reform to end the sex trade in South Africa. The organisation also supports women navigating the process of exit from the street-based sex trade. The participatory nature of the project was vital in creating the space for the women to explore the ways in which they could develop their own sense of agency through promoting empowerment and social action in various spheres of their lives, and thereby contribute to their communities.

In an initial focus group, the participants engaged in discussions about their daily lives and their experiences of power. The focus was particularly on the lack of social capital in their communities, and the stigma and other forms of violence that they were subjected to. After a short Photovoice training course, the women developed their photo-stories, which conveyed multiple experiences of living in poverty, violence and selling sex. Many photographs were taken, and from these the women decided which photos best captured the stories that they wished to tell.

The photo-stories in Figures 22.6a to 22.6c illustrate the importance of building safe spaces in their communities, especially for women and children, and their roles as women who contribute to making this happen. The discussion that followed the development of the photo-stories facilitated critical consciousness-raising around their own identities, power, connectedness and visibility. From their stories, we learnt that experiences of sexual violence are widespread.
The park is not safe, but the kids are playing there. You as the community can talk and give each [other] advice on how you can keep your kids safe when they are playing in the park. We as community watch our kids when they are playing. A place where our kids are playing must be safe and we watch them. A place where our kids play they must feel safe when we are watching them. A place where our kids play must be safe for our children. The future of our children must be safe. A place where they play is the place where they feel happy and safe. They don’t get into drugs, they are safe there.

This is a story of my friend who was raped. The day that this guy called her, she didn’t realise that the guy called her to rape her. When she got there the guy took out a gun and pointed it at her and said they must go to the forest. He was pushing her, her community was watching her,
and he left with her while everyone was watching. She came back and she locked herself in her room and didn’t want to talk to anyone. I was forced to kick the door in so that I could talk to her. It was not easy for the both of us, because she did not know what to do.

**Figure 22.6c** The place that I stay at is dirty

The place that I stay at is dirty, and the children are playing in the water. They are also bathing with this water and then they get diseases and are being eaten by mosquitoes . . . There is a guy who was staying there and they found him and he was taken to the hospital and then he died.

The women helped facilitate the first exhibition of their photo-stories on a significant public holiday, Women’s Day. After this first event, the women raised their voices and took complete ownership of their work: facilitating workshops based on their photo-stories, hosting more exhibitions and taking their stories to parliament. Through finding their own stories, and then being seen and heard through these images and stories, the women developed a greater sense of personal agency and a desire for activism. Subsequently, this flowed into a transition in their experiences of their social position in their respective communities, from one of being marginalised and stigmatised to the potential of being a respected peer and an integral member of the community.

**Representation and affect**

A fundamental concern in disrupting power relations is the politics of representation and affect. This is important in postcolonial contexts where the operations of power and privilege often silence particular voices, as highlighted in Spivak’s (1988) renowned essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’. In Photovoice
projects, the visual aspect is a powerful way of enabling participants to represent their own lives rather than being represented by others (e.g. researchers), an especially important element for marginalised groups whose experiences are often depicted in derogatory and stigmatising ways. Furthermore, the affective element is also significant as photographs often convey experiences that cannot be told through words. We argue that these dimensions of Photovoice enhance the participatory process in creative ways that are appealing and captivating and foster a deeper understanding of participants’ lived experiences.

**Case 4: Learners’ representations of their community**

This Photovoice project explored youth representations of community challenges and resources in a low-income, violence-prone residential area of Cape Town. Research on youth risk and victimisation in South Africa often adopts a ‘deficit’ model, focusing on factors that render youth vulnerable to harm rather than on assets that may promote youth resilience and empowerment. Further, South African research with youth has predominantly utilised standardised structured scales developed by adult researchers, based on their assumptions of what issues are salient for youth, and offering limited response options (Theron & Theron, 2010). Relatively few studies have adopted a more participatory approach which allows for the exploration of how young South Africans experience and make meaning of their social world, and for the facilitation of youth agency in highlighting issues of concern to them and participating in the development of solutions.

The project partnered with a community-based organisation in Hanover Park, a largely coloured residential area that was formed during the process of forced removals under apartheid. In addition to high levels of unemployment, it is characterised by recurrent and frequently lethal gang violence linked to the illegal drug trade. The organisation runs a number of community development programmes, including youth development initiatives with school learners, which aim to offer an alternative to a developmental trajectory towards gangsterism and drugs. Eight Grades 10 and 11 learners who were members of this organisation participated in the Photovoice study. In an initial focus group discussion, participants reflected on what they perceived to be the greatest challenges to their community, as well as aspects of the community that they valued and were proud of. After receiving basic training in photography skills and discussing the possible dangers and risks that they might encounter when taking photographs around the community, participants were asked to take photographs of ‘things in my community that I am proud of and things that I would like to change’. In a series of photo-elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), they then developed narratives about their photographs.

The photo-narratives revealed a tension between reproducing denigrated and pathologised representations of the community as crime-ridden, dangerous and dirty, and actively resisting and disrupting these representations. Some of the photographs and narratives focused on gang activities, drug use, neglected buildings and environmental hazards such as uncollected refuse, and the ways in which these restricted young people’s freedom and sense of safety (Figures 22.7a and 22.7b).
It [litter] affects Hanover Park very much coz people could get diseases from this dirt. Children's [and] babies’ lives are in danger coz babies gets um ill very easily because of the dirt . . . the children play here around and it’s dangerous because there could be glass cutted here or um the dirt it can give them some sort of illness

Adults is supposed to set an example like for the yongsters, but they are actually like throwing the dirt and then the children also sees they must do that and they think it’s actually the right thing to do.
Graffiti makes the place look untidy.

They [gangsters] are famous like writing on the wall, and now for a small children it’s like you, ja, you are big, you writing on the wall, you wearing a certain kind of clothes and you your style is baggy and like the – they that are cool for them and now they are falling in the same, in the same way and tomorrow it’s smaller and smaller and smaller kids doing the same and writing on more walls and they don't just write on the walls, they will write on their mother’s kitchen table also.

However, participants were aware of how Hanover Park might be perceived by outsiders and sought to disrupt stereotyped and limiting depictions of their community by deliberately choosing images of community gardens that sought to beautify the area, and different forms of social capital such as neighbours helping each other through initiatives like soup kitchens (Figures 22.8a and 22.8b).

Figure 22.8a  Beautifying with gardens

They just see the bad and they think the community’s dirty, like they don’t see this [gardens]. You see if they see that it will change their whole mindset.

Ja, the green, it’s a symbol of growth, like you see here, she starting her own garden.
This is two ladies dishing the food for the people standing in line. This people is actually wanting to make a change like and feed the needy. That is important also because you can’t always think of yourself and then there’s people that is in need . . . I think it’s just like helping hands, people looking out for each other.

I just felt like I wanna like show the people that there is people that has positive effects in the community not only negative effects.

The learners were eager to exhibit their photographs at their school during a school event, wanting to highlight aspects of the community that they felt required action and advocacy, as well as community assets that needed to be recognised and promoted. Reflecting their concerns about how the image and identity of the community may be influenced by physical signs of neglect and waste, they also proposed starting a community clean-up project, in which they would engage other youth in creating clean, safe and hygienic spaces where children could play. Before either of these plans could be put into action, gang violence in the community escalated, and recurrent street shootings forced many learners to stay home from school for several weeks due to realistic fears about their safety. By the time the gang violence lessened, the school year was over and the researchers were unable to gather the group together again for further planning. Despite the participants’ development of critical consciousness regarding community identity and representation, in this instance realistic contextual challenges limited the degree of agency and empowerment that was available to participants to effect social change.
Analysing Photovoice data

Analysing the data from Photovoice projects can take many forms. Similar to other qualitative methods, researchers can choose to use a thematic or content analysis to make sense of participants’ photographs and stories in order to situate the challenges and assets in their communities. This is often a useful first step in the analysis. Other approaches, such as discourse and narrative analysis, are also valuable when making sense of the identity and power dynamics that come across in participants’ testimonies through their choice of language and images.

An important part of Photovoice, however, is the process of participation. As shown in the above case studies, researchers may want to investigate processes of empowerment and critical consciousness, the state of social capital in participants’ environments and the politics of representation. This would typically be a secondary level of analysis that could include a case study approach – for instance, to investigate changes in participants’ lives during the course of the study. Ultimately, the approach to data analysis has to be based on the actual data collected and the kinds of questions the research aims to address. A practical approach is to frame a Photovoice project as an ethnographic study, with multiple methods and different levels of analysis.

Ethical considerations

As with any research endeavour, it is important to consider ethical questions. For PAR methods, and in this instance Photovoice, ethical issues are particularly interesting given the shifting of the role of ‘researcher’ to the participants. This means that the researcher becomes responsible for ensuring not only that participants are protected but also that they act in ethical ways towards others when they produce their photo-stories. In addition, visual methods such as photography bring up particular concerns that may not arise in more mainstream forms of qualitative work. The following are key ethical considerations for Photovoice research.

Consent

While taking photographs of objects or places usually presents a low risk to participants, taking photographs of other people may incur risks. Before the participants are given their cameras, the group facilitators should discuss with them how to make safe choices about what and whom to photograph. This should include discussions about the need to obtain verbal consent from people they may wish to photograph, acceptable ways to approach someone to take their picture and how to judge which situations may entail risk. Participants should be specifically instructed not to trespass on others’ property, and not to photograph any illegal activities that may provoke a threatening response.

Safety

In contexts where the safety of participants is a concern in the Photovoice process, certain strategies can be put in place to minimise this risk. In the Hanover
Park study, high levels of neighbourhood crime in this residential area meant that there was a potential risk that the participants might be robbed of their cameras while out taking photographs. In order to reduce this risk, participants were instructed to always have an older family member, a friend or a fellow participant accompany them when they were taking pictures outside of their homes or schools. Participants were asked to identify who these potential companions could be, and parents were informed of this requirement in the parental consent letter.

Another strategy is to organise fieldtrips with participants during which they can take photographs within a group context. In the project with women involved in the sex trade as well as in the project with lesbian and bisexual youth, the researcher and a professional photographer took the women on a photography-training fieldtrip to an informal settlement. This enabled the participants to build confidence and communication skills within the safety of a group, which they could then subsequently use in their own communities.

While safety requirements are likely to place some limitations on the types of photographs that participants are able to take to represent their communities, ethical concerns regarding participants’ safety have to take priority over methodological preferences.

**Power and representation**

Finally, discussions on the politics of representation should form an integral part of a Photovoice project. For example, photographs of children or vulnerable persons should preferably be anonymised or omitted from exhibitions to protect their identities and dignity. However, such decisions are not always straightforward and should form part of the participatory research process. In the study with black students at UCT, some students were adamant that photographs should not be modified, especially when they portrayed nudity as a political act. Others preferred to protect their identities by taking more abstract photos from fear of victimisation in a context of uneven power relations.

Issues of ethics, power and representation are particularly salient in research that involves working with children or young people. Getting such research through university ethics boards can be an onerous task. The challenge for the researcher who aims to centre or privilege the voices of young people is amplified, especially through encounters with disciplinary ethical demands that tend not to see children as agents but rather as those in need of adult protection. We encountered this issue very powerfully in the study with the lesbian and bisexual adolescents. Many of the young women in the study chose to include self-portraits in their photo-narratives. These portraits represented their visibility, pride and pleasure and thus were central to the stories of identity that they were constructing. The participants very proudly displayed these photo-stories at the public exhibition in their community. However, the ethical conditions on which this research was passed stipulated that any publications arising from the work should blur the faces of participants and others in the photographs. We sat with the discomfort of this condition in writing a paper emerging from
the work, with the awareness that blurring participants’ faces would render them invisible and reproduce the very power dynamics that marginalise and silence black lesbian and bisexual young people in the first place (Zway & Boonzaier, 2015). In the end, we decided not to include any photographs where we were required to blur participants’ faces.

A related ethical issue is how to ‘protect’ young people who may be carried away by the momentum and excitement of the project and who may share too much and make themselves vulnerable in the process. How are we to guard against this without reproducing the very binaries and power relationships that we endeavour to contest? This remains a challenge for researchers undertaking Photovoice work, especially with marginalised communities, children and youth.

Connected to this challenge are issues surrounding the way in which the cameras may create a distance between the viewer and what is being viewed. The subject of a photograph can too easily become an object. Through this objectification there is often a transfer of power; photographs last much longer than the moment they capture, and once they exist they can take on a different reality to the one intended by the photographer (Harley, 2012). Care must be taken to prevent images being later manipulated or misused, especially to avoid replication of the binary mentioned above.

While participatory methods such as Photovoice hold much value for working with young people and marginalised communities in ways that allow for the centring of their experiences and the acknowledgement of their agency, reflexive practice is essential for ensuring we are measured in the claims we make about its successes as well as for ensuring that we don’t reproduce the very arrangements that we set out to problematise.

Conclusion

As illustrated by the concepts and empirical examples presented in this chapter, Photovoice has the potential to contribute not only to the epistemological project of documenting how participants construct and experience their social worlds, but also to the political project of providing a space for diverse marginalised communities to have voice and agency in forging and contributing to a social justice agenda. As a group-based participatory methodology, Photovoice promotes collective critical consciousness and empowerment through dialogue and representation, mobilising and inspiring participants into social activism that can improve their lives. Photovoice projects also facilitate a collaborative relationship between researchers and participants, with researchers sometimes taking up an advocacy role in relation to the work being engaged (Moletsane et al., 2007) and disrupting existing power relationships where researchers are usually positioned as the ‘experts’. Instead, this approach foregrounds the importance of social capital – forging partnerships between researchers, participants, existing organisations that represent the interests of marginalised communities, and broader community stakeholders.
Ultimately, the degree to which Photovoice projects can result in real policy shifts is dependent on all these components working together. This is not an easy task, and the possibilities and limitations of each project depend on a variety of factors often related to the material, organisational and environmental resources available. In our experience, Photovoice projects work best in communities where there is already a degree of organisation or conscientisation taking place. In these conditions, Photovoice can serve as a springboard for groups to advance to the next level of social action.

The current climate of transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education presents real possibilities for these types of projects to gain traction and support. How people participate in claiming the material and symbolic resources that they need and how they disrupt social inequalities are intrinsically linked to knowledge projects that promote a social justice agenda. Social science research in South Africa needs to engage seriously with participatory and creative methods if it hopes to have any impact on developing policies and practices that matter in people’s lives.

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Notes
1 To ensure participants’ anonymity, their names are not given.
2 The term ‘coloured’ refers to the apartheid racial category designating people of mixed racial heritage.

References
Section Three: Transparadigmatic methods


