Chapter 13

Using Photo-Methods to Empower Participants in Education Research

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ABSTRACT

The use of photographs in ethnographic education research promises new insights and challenges to researchers who wish to do good, by doing science and working for justice in the communities under examination. The use of photo-elicitation is discussed as a method that can help alleviate what Foucault described as the analytical “gaze,” allowing for discussions of difficult or taboo subjects like race, sex, gender, and dis/ability. The history, uses, and techniques, are examined for different photo methods including photo-elicitation interviews and photovoice. This chapter also contributes practical suggestions for using photos in ethnographic research and illuminates new research in the field. Using photos in the reviewed studies achieved positive results for participants and revealed new understandings of communities, culture, and individuals.

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE AND ETHNOGRAPHY

There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer. – Ansel Adams – Landscape photographer and environmentalist (1902-1984)

All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth. – Richard Avedon – Fashion and portrait photographer (1923-2004)

The camera is an excuse to be someplace you otherwise don’t belong. It gives me both a point of connection and a point of separation. – Susan Meiselas – Documentary photographer (1948-)

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While it has not always been the case, today there is an expectation that the people involved in an ethnographic study are participants in a co-equal relationship exploring culture, not objects under examination as in more experimental methods (Lather, 1986; Painter, 2010). Whether by a researcher who is an insider (emic) or an outsider (etic), historically and fundamentally, ethnographies are an exploration of culture (Geertz, 1973). Culture is centered when researchers write a “thick description” that includes the setting where the observations are performed and situates the individual in a cultural framework (Geertz, 1973 p. 6). Scholars explain that ethnography is a tool for “understanding the Other” (Patton, 2002 p. 84) or as “a dialogue with the Other” (Madison, 2012 p. 8). While place and culture are central to ethnography, ultimately, the project of the ethnographer is to explain the most complicated subject on earth, people. People are complex, illogical, inconsistent, unreliable, and erratic. According to Frankham and MacRae (2011), ethnography is, “an approach characterized by uncertainty and contradictions. It is a field defined by ambitious claims (holism, immersion, depth, rapport) accompanied by discussion of the impossibility of ever reaching those goals” (p. 34). Science is purported to be rational, systematic, logical, and detached. Our quest in social science is to use science to explain this infinitely complicated species of human beings, and as educators, our quest is to empower the people we study to know themselves, and their communities, better.

To assume the awesome responsibility of conducting scientific ethnographic work that does justice to the people involved, a committed researcher engages the whole person and does not assume that cultural characteristics are adequate to define the participants. The people in the cultures we study are sometimes indicative of the culture where they are immersed, and sometimes not (Quantz & O’Connor, 1988). As social scientists, we exist in that gap between the larger culture and the inner life of individuals. How well we define that gap is the difference between ethnographies that develop revealing and instructive understandings that challenge a priori notions about the participants, and a merely descriptive enterprise that reifies current worldviews. This chapter will outline some of the benefits, issues, and possibilities of using photos in ethnographic education research. These concepts come from previous studies and theoretical work (Boucher, 2014; 2017a; 2017c; Boucher & Helfenbein, 2015) To accomplish this, I will outline some of the history of the method as well as include three examples to illustrate the potential of the emergent method when used to empower participants.

The Ideology Behind the Camera

In On Photography (1977), Susan Sontag explained that photography, unlike painting, was part of a larger project. She posed that the industrialization of film, cameras, and the images they created “…carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images” (p. 7). The publication of photos from faraway places indulged this notion of exploration from the comfort of home as photos from anthropological fieldwork were made available in magazines. Alexander Graham Bell became the president of the National Geographic Society in 1897 and moved the magazine from a mostly descriptive journal to the picture-rich format recognized today. “He told his editors to ‘let the world hear from you as our representative’” (National Geographic Virtual Library, 2015). The work of the society became synonymous with Anthropology in the minds of the public throughout the 20th century and the photos of African, Middle Eastern, Central and South American people were fascinating to Americans and Europeans. While outwardly in the pursuit of science, these early explorers were less concerned with uncovering the ways of knowing that indigenous people hold, than revealing exotic, strange, and titillating characters that propped up their own ideology.
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