PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

Carolin Voigt

What is Participatory photography?

Participatory photography is an engaging approach that enables people to share their perspectives and express their aspirations in ways that are not constrained by their ability share these within the confines of conventional interactive processes or the written word. It can inspire and lead to new initiatives by people to improve their situation.

Also known as Photo Voice, Visual Voice or Talking Pictures, participatory photography is a strategy and method that can be applied within Participatory Action Research (Wang 1999: 185, Singhal et al. 2007: 216). The Photo Voice method was initially development by Wang and Burris (1994) and focused on issues of woman's health in Chinese rural areas. The theoretical background of this method is based on literature of feminist theory, critical consciousness, nontraditional approaches to documentary photography and education (Wang 1999: 185).

Photo Voice has three main aims: 1) Enable marginalized groups of people or communities to visualize and reflect their community strength and challenges, 2) stimulate critical dialogue on community issues between different stakeholders and 3) reach policymaker to contribute to positive change (cf. Wang 1999: 185).

By placing the camera into the hands of members of the local community, new perspectives and additional insight into social processes can be expressed – not only by the participants themselves, but also by facilitators, policy makers and scientists who are involved in local development processes. Participatory photography as a strategy challenges the traditional quantitative and often deductive research approach and highlights the active role of the participants by enabling them to reproducing their own living realities and narratives. This changes the research focus from primarily aggrieved parties to involved parties (cf. Gotschi et al. 2009, Wang 1999).

Adding meaning to the images that are produced is as important as the process of picture taking itself. Within the critical dialogue between different stakeholders and/ or within the community, identities are shaped, stories are told and experiences are shared, and within these processes people acquire knowledge from others that is new to them. Participatory photography can therefore be seen as a means of co-learning. This participative process enables communities, individuals and facilitators to take action to bring about positive change. It can also enable decision-makers to set the agenda for policies, promoting sustainable development and social justice based on the needs and interests of affected communities. Furthermore, it can enable researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the local context, values and perspectives to contribute to processes of knowledge exchange and learning (cf. Wang 1999: 186ff., Singhal et al. 2007: 217ff., Oettle & Koelle 2003).

Why use participative photography?

Participatory photography reflects what people focus their attention on within a process that is rich in multiple perspectives and enables people to generate narratives around the created images that foster deeper understanding of people’s realities, including their inspirations, challenges, livelihoods and local customs and context. Photographic images are abstract products that can enable individuals or communities to reflect on their living realities in ways that they might not have previously been fully aware of (cf. Armson & Ison 2001). Further, sharing the images and their associated narratives with the wider community can
Participatory Action Research

Participation Action Research (PAR) is a research approach that integrates people’s or communities’ perspectives about social processes and challenges which affect their lives in all aspects of research, in order to improve their lives. PAR aims to balance need- and interest-based purposes, action and reflection in a learning cycle, where action and reflection are intertwined and cannot be separated from one another (cf. Baum et al. 2006: 854, Gotschi et al. 2009, Wang 1999, Freire 1970: 87).

The origins of Participative Action Research are manifold. Philosophically, action research draws from liberal humanism, pragmatism and critical theory (cf. Reason 2006: 187f.). The latter challenged the traditional way of producing knowledge within science via quantitative and deductive research, which can be misused for the consolidation of existing unequal power relations and status quo. Advocates of critical theory argue that experience is also a reliable basis for knowledge. Hence, experiential learning is understood as a legitimate and alternative way of knowledge production that influences practice and is further able to make a positive change towards more sustainable development (cf. Baum et al. 2006: 854f, Minkler 2000: 193).

Social scientists such as the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) and the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire (1970) had a significant influence on the development of PAR (cf. Reason 2006: 187f., Pain 2004: 653, Minkler 2000: 191, Singhal et al. 1992: 213ff.). According to Freire’s epistemology and his constructivist perspective, people’s consciousness mirrors their external reality and vice versa. Thus the external reality is a creation of consciousness (Baum et al. 2006: 856): “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire 1970: 87).

2. Allow people adequate opportunity to gather images

Ensure that the participants have adequate time to gather images at different times of the day, and in different contexts that will enable them to present a comprehensive set of images while not intruding on others in the process.

3. Selection, contextualization and codifying issues

The process of selecting images is as important as the meaning attributed to them by the people who took the images. Ensure that people have sufficient time in a safe space to reflect on the images, select those that they believe reflect important realities, and generate a narrative for each selected image. The individual narratives will give an insight into the local context with its strength and challenges. In an additional step crucial issues can be identified and codified (cf. Wang 1999: 191, Gotschi et al. 2009: 298).

4. Plan a format to share the photographs and narratives with the wider community

To facilitate improvement in people’s situations or livelihoods, the facilitator of the process should carefully identify an appropriate platform to share the results of the photography. For example, it might be helpful to identify the audience that can make necessary decisions, or influence policy making. A critical dialogue with the wider community should stimulate discussion and knowledge exchange towards enabling people to bring about improvements in their situations (cf. Wang 1999: 188f).

5. Analysis and interpretation

If it has been agreed with the participants that the participatory photography may contribute to a wider research process, certain analytical aspects should be considered in the interpretation of the results: 1) analysing the process of image creation, 2) analysing the content of the images themselves, 3) analysing the narrative associated with each image, 4) analysing the reception of the images and the meanings attributed by the audience with which they are subsequently shared (cf. Wang 1999: 186, Gotschi et al. 2009: 298).
Participatory Photography at Dobellaarskop, Suid Bokkeveld, South Africa

In September 2013 a participatory photography process was undertaken by the community at the farm Dobellaarskop in the Suid Bokkeveld area, situated in the Northern Cape, South Africa. In this semi-arid region, small-scale farmers have to cope with harsh environmental conditions, such as low soil fertility, unpredictable weather conditions, very high temperatures in summer and other weather extremes. For example, between 2003 and 2006 the farmers of the Suid Bokkeveld suffered from a severe drought (cf. Oettle 2012).

The participatory photography was undertaken in the context of research by student Carolin Voigt and was integrated into a local Participatory Action Research process focused on climate change adaptation strategies of livestock farmers, facilitated by the local NGO Indigo development & change. Participatory photography combined with participatory observation were used as research methods to gain insight into small-scale farmers’ livelihoods and their particular vulnerabilities, and to enable them to take action to improve their situation. The research was also intended to contribute to global discussions about climate change by broadening these to include social dimensions such as sustainable development, social justice and well-being, rather than exclusively concentrating on technical approaches and bio-chemical aspects (cf. Kasperson & Kasperson 2001, O’Brien et al 2004, Smit & Pilifosova 2001, Leichenko & O’Brien 2002).

During a period of two weeks, five participants (3 men, 2 women) shared a camera and photographed their lives, focusing on aspects that are important for their livelihoods and livestock keeping – taking into account the challenging weather conditions which the participants have to face. In addition to this, the researcher not only facilitated the process but also contributed to it by taking pictures and including her perspective on the same topic.

Within small group discussions the participants selected their four or five most important pictures and explained the reason, why they took this picture and attributed meaning to it. As one participant only joint the process for one week, only two pictures were taken. The overall 26 pictures and its narrative were shared with the wider community in a photo exhibition.

Reflections

Carolin Voigt shared the following observations about the process that she facilitated:

- Be aware of the limits of participation and its intensity, so as to be able to assess when to interfere and when not to interfere
- Keep the process short and simple so as to avoid confusion and lower the barriers to participation
- Make the process attractive and motivate participants without putting pressure on them
- Be open-minded in terms of the direction taken by the process that you facilitate
- Explore sensitively how to share the outcome of the photography – this is a crucial aspect, and deserves careful consideration
- Invite and obtain the commitment of all relevant stakeholders: this might be challenging, and some flexibility will probably be needed
- Use diverse information channels to reach the audience
Carolin Voigt - Participatory Photography

Some visitors also provide comments and feedback (Photo: C Voigt)