The Art of Observation:
Issues and Potential of Using Photo-Methods in Critical Ethnography with Adolescents

Michael L. Boucher Jr., Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

The use of photographs in ethnographic education research is an emerging method that promises to enable scholars to collect deeper, more meaningful data from individuals who may otherwise be silenced. When used to empower participants, photo methodologies can remove what Foucault (1980) described as the analytical "gaze," allowing for discussions of difficult or taboo subjects like race, sex, gender, and dis/ability (p. 155). This article discusses the development of photo methods in ethnographic education research, contributes practical suggestions as to their use, and provides successful examples where photos have empowered study participants. To do both science and justice in cooperation with one's participants, empowering communities and individuals and collecting trustworthy data are equal goals. Using photos in the reviewed studies achieved positive results for participants and revealed new understandings of communities, culture, and individuals.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION: ETHNOGRAPHY, CULTURE, AND PEOPLE

To me, photography is an art of observation. It's about finding something interesting in an ordinary place… I've found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them. (Elliott Erwitt- 1928- Documentary and advertising filmmaker)

What you have caught on film is captured forever… It remembers little things, long after you have forgotten everything. (Aaron Siskind- 1903-1991 Photographer)

In photography, there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more real than reality. (Alfred Stieglitz- 1864-1946 Photographer)

Whether by a researcher who is an insider (emic) or an outsider (etic), historically and fundamentally, ethnographies are an exploration of culture (Geertz, 1973). 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). 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). To conduct ethnographic work that does justice to the people involved, a researcher should be mindful to engage the whole person of the participant and not just assume that cultural characteristics are adequate to define her or him. 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 the larger culture is central to the creation of an ethnography, ultimately, our research is about people; complicated, irrational, uncontrollable, conflicted, illogical, inconsistent, and unreliable people. Cultures are made up of these individuals who are sometimes indicative of the culture where they are immersed, and sometimes not (Quantz & O'Connor, 1988). Exposing that contradiction between the larger culture and the inner life of an individual defines 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 article will outline some of the benefits, issues, and possibilities of using photos in ethnographic education research. 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.

HOW PHOTO METHODS HAVE BEEN USED

Ideological Origins

Photographs, famous or mundane, bring emotions, memories, and intellect to the fore, especially when people discuss them with trusted friends or family. Photos in anthropological fieldwork have been around for as long as there have been cameras. 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 of White/European superiority. The historical entanglement of colonialism and exploratory anthropology has been a topic in the anthropological literature and was summed up by Gogh (1968):

Until the Second World War most of our fieldwork was carried out in societies that had been conquered by our own government. We tended to accept the imperialist framework as given, perhaps partly because we were influenced by the dominant ideas of our time, and partly because at that time there was little anyone could do to dismantle the empires…Applied anthropology came into being as a kind of social work and community development effort for non-white peoples, whose future was seen in terms of gradual education, and of amelioration of conditions, many of which had actually been imposed by their Western conquerors in the first place. (p. 13)

Gogh, who divided the world into White and "Non-White" peoples, lamented the loss of empires and the rise in "revolutionary movements" in the 1960s that hampered relationships used to gain access to subjects "as white liberals between the conquerors and the colonized" (p. 17). This attitude and practice of White researchers led to the creation of ethnographies whose sole purpose was to build a narrative of the backward Others and reassure White Europeans and Americans of their cultural, racial, racial and scientific supremacy.

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