

Chapter 11

Using Photo-Methods to Empower Participants in Education Research: Creating Knowledge and Change

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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 science and good work 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, 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.

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*“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-)*

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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). 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

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