

CHAPTER 8

ETHICAL ISSUES IN A PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVING YOUTH WITH REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Photography is used in research because of its appeal for communicating, expressing feelings, sharing experiences, raising new awareness of participants and potential audiences, clarifying social issues, and framing plans for action. Taking and sharing photos has become easier particularly because of ready access to devices with cameras. Yet, using photographs in research can undermine anonymity and confidentiality (Noland, 2006), and unanticipated unauthorised dissemination of digital images raises ethical concerns for researchers using photography in their research methods (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018). In this chapter, the authors discuss the participatory photography method and provide practical suggestions for carrying out ethical research using participatory photography. The authors highlight the cultural, social, and contextual situatedness of ethics by drawing on our own research project with youth with refugee experience.

Keywords: Participatory photography; dignity; consent; refugees and immigrants; youth; arts-based research

INTRODUCTION

Photographs have the power to evoke a profound sense of understanding through empathic experience (Eisner, 2007). Photographic images have brought into sharp focus local and global concerns of environmental devastation, natural disasters, war, famine, migration, gendered violence, military suppression, poverty, oppression of workers, and many other social issues. They have sparked an array of responses, and some have spurred social activism and change. For example, the widely circulated image of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi's body, washed ashore on a beach in Turkey in 2017, generated attention to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Syria. Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandson, and Gregory (2017) assert that this 'iconic photo of a single child had more impact than statistical reports of hundreds of thousands of deaths', adding, 'people who had been unmoved by the relentlessly rising death toll in Syria suddenly appeared to care much more after having seen Aylan's photograph' (p. 640).

Because of the power of photography to arouse emotions, promote deep reflection, and communicate feelings, ideas, and experiences (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018), researchers have turned to photography as a research method. One such method is participatory photography. Participatory photography offers valuable opportunities to expand the depth of research participants' voices as they share their stories, name their realities, engage in critical dialogue, and promote awareness of their experiences within a group (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018, p. 104). The photos and the narratives related to the photos lend themselves to creative and engaging knowledge dissemination, increasing the accessibility of the participants' stories, broadening the audience and having potential impact.

While recognising the value of photography in research, we also acknowledge there are complex and challenging ethical considerations involved in the participatory photography research process. Indeed, 'the act of taking pictures in any community is a political act' (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008, p. 1396). Ethical research implicates a deliberate intention to do no harm.

In this chapter, we refer to a study we recently completed with colleagues.¹ The purpose was to support youth, who came to the Halifax, Nova Scotia as refugees, in exploring concepts and issues of social justice, social activism, migration, and learning about participatory photography methods. Over a 12-week period, 10 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 with refugee experience participated in a series of workshops where they received basic training in camera operation and photo editing skills, as well as time spent on discussing concepts of social justice and activism and what these terms mean to them. Youth used the skills developed in the workshops to take photos that communicate their lived experiences and the social justice concepts they wished to share. At each session, which lasted about two hours, participants shared and discussed their photos with the group. Discussions were supported by a group facilitator. While we offered basic point and shoot cameras, all participants chose to use their cell phones as cameras. At the end of the 12-week period, a public forum was organised by the participants and research team to showcase the work of participants. The event

provided a further opportunity for participants to develop their public speaking and advocacy skills.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with insight into the methodology and practical suggestions for carrying out ethical research using participatory photography. We start with a brief definition of participatory photography, then we discuss the ethical considerations implicated in four stages, specifically related to ethical practices we encountered in our research study, followed by a conclusion.

PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

Participatory photography is an arts-based method. The essential purposes of arts-based research methods are to:

enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for purposes of advancing knowledge. (Cole & Knowles, 2007, p. 59)

For us, participatory photography is an umbrella concept encompassing different collaborative forms of photography-based methods. In general terms, participatory photography is a collaborative research method in which research participants are actively involved in taking photographs to document their lived experiences, tell their stories, explore community needs, and create awareness of their experiences and circumstances within a group, and possibly with a wider audience. The method aims to encourage self-awareness and group discussion, and develop collective knowledge. It is a valuable research method for researchers working with marginalised groups (Gotschi, Delve, & Freyer, 2009; Prins, 2010), including refugee and im/migrant youth (Brigham, 2015; Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018; Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Zhang, 2018; Fassetta, 2016; Robertson, Gifford, McMichael, & Correa-Velez, 2016), people with disabilities (Jurkowski, 2008; Newman et al., 2009; Povee, Bishop, & Roberts, 2014), war affected youth (Denov, Doucet, & Kamara, 2012), people with early-stage Alzheimer disease (Wiersma, 2011), women experiencing chemotherapy (Frith & Harcourt, 2007), children living in orphanages (Johnson, 2011), Indigenous communities (Castleden et al., 2008), children with autism (Carnahan, 2006), and people who are homeless (Hodgetts, Radley, Chamberlain, & Hodgetts, 2007; Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). The method allows for participants to communicate stories without relying solely on words. It is an appropriate method for those whose first language is not the same as the other research participants and/or researchers. The research participants can be engaged in the research 'in a meaningful way, either as the subjects of the research, co-researchers, or as researchers of their own experiences' (Eliadou, 2015, cited in Barromi Perlman, 2016, p. 6). It enables the participants to have control over the dissemination of the photographs.

The premises behind using participatory photography in research are that photos can:

- (a) prod and sharpen memory, reduce misunderstandings, and stimulate emotional storytelling (Collier, 1957, p. 858);
- (b) raise new awareness of research participants' consciousness of their social existence (Harper, 2002, p. 21);
- (c) help clarify a social issue and frame plans for action (Singhal, Harter, Chitnis, & Sharma, 2007, p. 216); and
- (d) potentially reach a wide audience including policy-makers and the public in general.

We do not use participatory photography and photovoice interchangeably as some scholars do (e.g. Johnson, 2011). Photovoice is a specific method developed by Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1994), and while it is like participatory photography because it is participatory and the participants are co-researchers and have control over their photos and narratives, photovoice is committed to system-level change. We preferred to have participants decide if and how they would reach policy-makers and others. Our concern was that if we had declared that there would be a system-level change as a result of the project and none occurred, our research participants would have developed a lack of confidence and trust in the research team and the project. Ethical considerations are at the research preparation stage.

Ethical considerations related to 'the protection of subjects from harm, the right to privacy, the notion of informed consent, and the issue of deception' (Merriam, 2009, p. 230) have to be addressed at the preparation stage, that is, when designing the research; before recruitment. In our study, preparation was not a simple matter for several reasons.

First, as with any research, researchers must reckon with issues of power, trust, and ownership (Castleden et al., 2008). The benefit of participatory photography is that it is participatory and the participants are in effect co-researchers who have control over their representations in the study (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018, p. 105) thereby lessening the power imbalance between researchers and participants. However, as researchers, we are

privileged, highly educated, and professionally trained ... [who], as social actors, may ... reproduce unequal social and power relations, such as race, gender, and class relations between themselves and participants within the social institution and a larger global and neo-liberal context. (Zhu, 2019, p.64)

We had to avoid a 'fixed method' that reflects an 'academic trend of doing "parachute" research' (Castleden et al., 2008, p. 1401). Parachute research is when a researcher parachutes into a community for a short time, without taking the required time for the community to know them for the researcher to get to know the community in an effort to build trust.

Further, sustained participation by a group over an extended period of time is required to develop a sense of community between the participants and

researchers (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Zhang, 2018). We discuss the time-intensive aspect of our research below and elaborate on how that may be an ethical concern. In our study, our research team included two team members who work with the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), which has youth-focussed programmes. One of these team members worked closely with youth and had an established relationship through the programmes with some of the youth who subsequently participated in our project. Additionally, the first author has been working in the Halifax community with refugee and immigrant families for over 15 years and is familiar to several refugee and immigrant families. These relationships and positive reputations in the community helped the team members to build trust over time. Opportunities for participants and the research team members to get to know one another were achieved through ice-breaker activities during every session.

Researchers must become more conscious of power imbalances between themselves and the participants and within communities and between potential participants. Gotschi et al. (2009) who involved women and men farmers in Mozambique in their photography project found that the women participants, who were explicitly allocated the cameras and trained in their use, had their cameras taken away by their husbands or male leaders. The resulting photos in the project were predominantly from a male perspective. Further, Gotschi et al. reported that a male leader used the camera to 'increase his reputation by promising people to get them their pictures' but the camera had a limited number of shots, so not everyone got their picture taken resulting in the repeating of the first stage of the project. These examples point to ethical dilemmas, including: the women's possession of the borrowed cameras created unanticipated impacts on relationships in their families and in the community at large, and the resulting 'data' (i.e. photographs) had a limited women's perspective, which was the main research focus. This seemed to be partly because the participants lacked clarity for the research purpose (suggesting a communication problem between the researchers and participants), the researchers were not fully aware of the gendered power differentials in the community, and the community at large did not have sufficient 'buy in' for the research project. In that research project, participatory photography may not have been the most appropriate method.

In our study, potential participants met one-to-one with two team members to have the project explained to them and where they could ask clarifying questions, an information letter was given to each participant, and more than twice participants reviewed the consent form with research team members. Additionally, even though participants were offered cameras and were trained by a professional photographer on how to use them, they preferred to use their own cellphones. This proved helpful as the ubiquity of cellphones reduces the visibility of these devices within community and lessens what Sontag (1977) refers to as the intrusive feel that a traditional camera sometimes arouses. As such, our participants felt a higher degree of ease and comfort as they went about capturing their individual experiences and photographing things meaningful to them. Furthermore, the first author had worked with the community on two previous participatory photography projects that had culminated in several public events, which some of

the participants had heard about. Hence, the photography research process was somewhat familiar to some of our youth participants.

Second, the participatory photography method often leads to culminating events intended to share participants' perspectives with wider audiences and raise awareness of issues with the public and policy-makers (such as photography displays or community shows). Therefore, research projects using participatory photography will usually entail involving established community partners who have networks in the community and long-term connections with policy-makers/people in positions of power early on in the research stage. Community partnerships also allow for a broader reach for recruitment and they can give insights into wording and appropriate phrasing in the recruitment materials. For example, before recruitment, our research team (which consisted of two people from an established immigrant settlement association, a member of a youth-focused arts-based organisation, two academic researchers, and several research assistants) met to discuss the appropriate terminology for refugee youth – our target participant group. After discussion, we settled on 'youth with refugee experience' because some youth with whom the team members had worked with in the past found the term 'refugee' a stigmatising and exclusionary social label.

Third, if there are language proficiency challenges or a lack of a common language among the participants and researchers, it may be necessary to have recruitment tools in several languages and have researchers meet with potential participants one to one to assess their needs and language skills. [Strawn and Monama \(2012\)](#) who worked with women in Soweto, South Africa noted that they involved others to discuss 'the informed consent with participants in their mother tongues' (p. 543). However, the use of interpreters or translators in research can pose challenging ethical dilemma especially if translators are not closely connected to the research project or when translators and research participants belong to what they may perceive as antagonistic ethnic or religious groups. While we did not have to rely on the services of an interpreter because all of our participants were required to have fluency in English in order to participate, some studies demonstrate how the ethicality of research was seriously undermined by the use of interpreters (see [Halilovich, 2013](#); [Hopkins, 2008](#); [Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015](#); [Mackenzie & McDowell, 2007](#); [Smith, 2009](#)). Also, during our initial meetings with participants, we took the time to make sure they understood the ethical complications of visual research and that they were aware of the requirements the project demands in terms of effort and time. These initial meetings were also an opportunity to gauge participants' commitment to the project since, as mentioned above, the method requires a significant investment of time.

Fourth, if the research participants are minors, as was the case for some of the participants in our project, it is important to recognise that youth 'are dependent on parents or other adult guardians and lack a voting voice' ([Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004](#), p. 56). Therefore, we, the research team, took a lead in launching the process by drawing on our resources and networks. Specifically, we involved community partners: Youth Art Connection ([YAC, 2019](#)) which has established community relationships and networks and whose mission is to work with youth of all backgrounds to grow a successful career and life and the

Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia, which is committed to helping newcomers build a future where they belong and grow (ISANS, 2019).

Participatory photography often embraces concepts of empowerment, collaboration, and community, which have been themselves the subject of critique. For instance, Hayward et al. (2004, cited in [Denison & Stillman, 2012](#), p. 1040) criticises ‘a mythologising of the power of participatory methodologies to accomplish problem solving, emancipation or empowerment’. We agree with [Strack et al. \(2004\)](#) who, although are referring to photovoice, make an important point for participatory photography in general. They advise ‘engagement in a photovoice project will not lead to a complete state of empowerment’ and allowing youth to believe that ‘could leave participants feeling more hopeless and unempowered than when they started the program’ (p. 57). Participatory photography methods often aim at social change and empowerment, yet this can sometimes be challenging, especially given the intangible nature of social change and empowerment. [Duffy \(2011\)](#), citing numerous scholars, touches on the polysemic nature of the concept of empowerment, arguing that it can mean learning a new skill, taking part in political action, and gaining critical awareness of surrounding social concerns, among other things. As [Duffy \(2011\)](#) states, ‘empowerment as a process or outcome may not always be present or apparent’ (p. 3) and its meaning is contextually dependent. Participants who had worked diligently to generate photographs depicting their societal concerns may expect a higher level of engagement from policy-makers and decision takers only to be disappointed at the lack of responsiveness from these officials. For instance, after a photo exhibition in which they engaged in discussions with different policy figures about methods for social change, participants in [Denov et al.’s \(2012\)](#) project felt that

these discussions ultimately failed to yield concrete changes for the youth [which left them] and [the] research team with concerns about the feasibility of photovoice as a truly viable tool for social change. (p. 130)

A similar concern regarding the social action component is voiced by [Johnson \(2016\)](#), who warned against ‘raising false hopes or unrealistic expectations amongst the participants of photovoice projects who are positioned to be the champions for social change in their communities’ (p. 799). Instead, he recommended that researchers explain to their participants ‘the project has the potential to be policy informing rather than policy changing’ (p. 799).

For this reason, we recommend that in the early planning stage, researchers must seek the support and interest of community and policy-makers, a point raised above. While we are referring to youth, this is equally important for adult research participants. Specifically, we involved a community partner (Youth Art Connection) who has established relationships and networks with youth of all backgrounds ([YAC, 2019](#)). Additionally, when working with youth, there may be a need to meet with parents or guardians about the project, as they would be required to give consent for their children to be involved. In our project, we did not meet with parents; rather our consent process involved the following process: two team members met with each participant who expressed an interest in the

research. Once we got a sense of the participants' abilities to communicate in English (which was a criterion for participating) and their level of commitment, we discussed the consent form and then invited them to meet with the full group of 10 youth. At the first group meeting, participants brought their signed consent forms, which for minors included the signature of their parents. At that time, they met their peers and the whole research team, as well as the counsellor who was available at all times should any youth require professional psychological support. We also went over the consent form again.

Fifth, as the method involves reflecting on and discussing personal experiences and producing photos and stories based on personal experiences, a professional counsellor is often required by university ethics review boards to be available to the participants. Participants in our project had arrived in Canada as refugees; they are from different cultural backgrounds and some had experienced significant trauma. It was essential that our research team consisted of leaders who had experience and training in dealing with these considerations. Before beginning the research sessions, we hired a professional social worker with experience in working with youth who have experienced trauma, who herself is a racial minority, to be available at all times to provide our participants with professional support when needed. Like the research team, the social worker needed to establish trust with the participants over time.

Once the research had been planned, an ethics review had been approved, and the participants were recruited and had consented to participate, we began the training stage.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AT THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT TRAINING STAGE

The training of the participants is a critical step, which involves discussing power dynamics, the use of cameras in public places, and ethical issues, including interactions within the group. For example, in our project, to create a safe environment and to ensure participants were emotionally protected, participants together developed community standards, which they discussed and added to each session (see Fig. 1). This included keeping one another's stories in confidence, communicating respectfully and being supportive of one another. It is important to refer to the community standards at each research session and invite further discussion about the standards each time.

Since the participants in participatory photography research projects are taking photos on their own outside of the research sessions, there is a need to plan how participants will describe the purpose of taking photos in the community and for obtaining consent from people who are identifiable in the participants' photos. In our project, Author 1 developed a short consent form that each participant would need to have signed by anyone who appeared in the photos (and if the identifiable subject in the photo was a child, parental/guardian consent was required). In the training, we asked participants to be prepared to explain what they were doing when taking photos in public places, to ask for permission

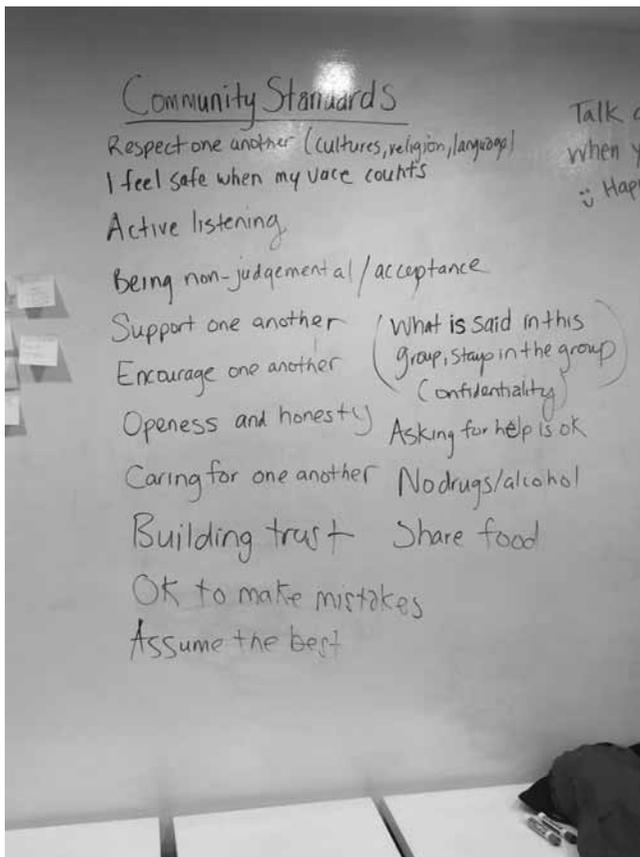


Fig. 1 Community Standards Developed by the Research Participants.

before taking photos of people, to always consider people's safety, and if certain people do not want their photo taken, respect their decision. To help youth feel more comfortable with the process of negotiating social interactions and to practice alternative actions, participants could use role-playing and modelling (Prins, 2010; Strack et al., 2004).

Training also includes training in camera operation, photography skills development, photo editing skills, and safety. The data collecting stage is next, where participants begin taking photos.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AT THE DATA COLLECTION STAGE

Taking photographs can be an intrusive activity. Indeed, photography is a 'culturally embedded technology of power' (p. 441), which can 'operate as a technology of surveillance that breeds distrust and facilitates social control' (Prins, 2010, p. 4).

Prins (2010) gives examples from her participatory photography study in El Salvador, in which her participants experienced suspicion, hostility, ridicule, and embarrassment as they took photos in the community. Prins (2010) explains:

[Research participant, Esmeralda] went to the cañal [sugar cane field] to take a picture of it and the owner came up and asked her what she was doing. She explained. He asked who was in charge of this project and she gave him my name. He said that I was telling her to take pictures of it so that I could come and 'darle fuego' [set it on fire]. Then Esmeralda went to the school to take a picture of it and the [principal] and a few teachers ended up talking to her and asking why she was taking pictures there. Again, they asked who was in charge and she gave them my name and mentioned Alfalit [the nongovernment organization]. 'If one child disappears, we're going to go look for her [author]' [translated from Spanish], they said... Then Esmeralda went to take a picture of a large [farm machine] and ...the owner said that I was having her take pictures so that I could come and steal it (p. 434)

As we mentioned in the first section, preparing participants for possible negative responses, such as criticisms and hostility, is important. In addition, regular opportunities to discuss participants' needs, concerns and emerging problems throughout the study are helpful. Prins reminds us that the camera is not 'an accultural, intrinsically liberating technology that produces similar results in any social cultural setting' (Prins, 2010, p. 427). She advocates for a 'judicious' and socio-culturally informed approach to photography.

The beauty of the participatory photography method is that it allows participants to express ideas that are not limited or constrained by words and language, yet it is important to recognise that non-tangible topics to which participants may wish to bring attention cannot be easily captured in a photo. For instance, Strawn and Monama (2012) give an example of participants who shared a story of sexual harassment in the workplace, which 'did not readily lend itself to the photographic image' (p. 545). Castleden et al. (2008) give an example of a participant's wish to draw attention to gossip as a social health issue in the community. 'Her solution was to photograph the word spelled out on a Scrabble game board' (p. 1402). In my own [Author 1's] previous study, a participant wanted to convey issues related to her identity through poetry, so she wrote the poem, typed it up and took a photo of the written poem. These examples show the creativity of participants in trying to convey ideas that do not lend themselves easily to photographic images. They also suggest that in some cases, a process that includes storytelling or reflective writing that helps to capture narratives and ideas beyond or outside of photographs contributes to maintaining the integrity of the participants' stories. A method that limits the research participants' ability to share their stories in a fulsome way becomes an ethical concern in that participants' voices are partially or fully restricted unnecessarily.

Gotschi et al. (2009) reported that in their study with farmers in Mozambique their participants wanted to photograph what they do at harvesting time, but it was not harvesting season. Therefore, the research participants involved the community in staging photographs where they posed with equipment and props to simulate the activity. The other group of participants in their project simply waited for harvest season to arrive to take photos thereby delaying the project by several months. We suggest that there is no ethical issue with simulation. We take

the view that it is the participants' choice about what they want to depict in their photographs and how. However, this example is a reminder that researchers must be flexible and patient, as not all critical activities or events that are important to participants will coincide with the researchers' availability. Researchers would benefit from planning their projects including the time frame and duration for the project with communities.

A challenge for this type of research project, which is often time-intensive, is sporadic attendance, resulting in a small core group of participants that stays involved in the project from beginning to end. The amount of time required of participants is usually significant and as noted above, in order to build a sense of trust and community a long period of time is required for the project. Moreover, many participants who are marginalised are experiencing multiple barriers and demands, leaving them little time for time-intensive projects like participatory photography projects. In our project, we learned of the youths' multiple responsibilities that included: caring for younger siblings and elders, acting as translators for family members at appointments, doing paperwork (such as paying bills and filling in various types of forms), helping family members with school work, running errands, and doing their own school work, paid employment, and social activities. We provided incentives such as the use of a camera for the duration of the study and receiving developed photographs as well as electronic copies of photographs on flash drives at no cost to them. We also compensated participants with gift cards, and provided refreshments and public transportation passes. Yet the reality was that participants could not always participate despite their best intentions. As mentioned above, we interviewed the interested participants before they formally agreed to participate to gauge their interest and availability for the project and we tried to be as flexible as possible with meeting times, yet within the first four weeks of the project we had a number of participants reduce their participation and a few withdrew. This may become an ethical issue as the group loses its sense of cohesiveness and those unable to regularly participate may feel less included when they return to the group after an extended absence. Further, as [Bukowski and Buetow \(2011\)](#) explain, if all their participants (women who are homeless) could have come together as a group it would have 'increased the ability of the women to advocate collectively for what they wanted' (p. 744). Additionally, had their participants been involved over a longer time period there could have been a better focus on the participants' changing situations and a better understanding of why they experienced changes. Ethically, even while participants may be foregoing income in order to participate in the research project, compensation/remuneration must not be excessive as it may impact the participants' sense of free choice to participate.

Financial resources can be limiting factors in the use of photography in research ([Coles-Ritchie, Monson, & Moses, 2015](#)). To cover the costs of cameras and other materials required for the conduct of photography-based research projects, researchers have to search for and secure funds, grants, or donations from third party stakeholders. For instance, in their photovoice study with social work students and the lack of sufficient funding, [Mulder and Dull \(2014\)](#) were not able to provide digital cameras to their participants and, instead, asked them to use

their own smartphones or any other camera device they had. In our project, we gave the participants the choice of using their cellphone cameras or basic point and shoot cameras. The youth chose to use their own devices. However, we found that using these devices impacted the ability to share photographs as planned because the lower resolution did not allow us to enlarge the participants' photos for a photo display.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AT THE ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION STAGE

In our study, the analysis stage mainly occurred with the participants as they prepared for the dissemination of the project. During group dialogues with facilitators throughout all the sessions, each participant had several opportunities to share and talk about the meaning of their photos and about social justice, which was the overarching theme of our study. As each participant shared, other participants and facilitators asked questions and made comments (e.g. 'That reminds me of a picture I took', or 'That's the same in my culture!'). Participants also chose, arranged, and grouped their own and/or other participants' photos to tell a story or define a theme. In this way, participants were engaged in thematic analysis on both an individual and group basis. Through storytelling, the participants dug into the complexity of themes. For example, while several photos could be grouped as images of nature, through discussion, participants elaborated on how some of these pictures connected to war, food insecurity, gender inequality, environmental destruction, and loneliness. The participants' captioning of the photos for the public event, their public speaking at the event, as well as their songs, dances, and poems reflected their analysis of their photographs and experiences.

At the dissemination stage, maintaining the rights and dignity of the participants, their photographs and any identifiable subject in the photographs is complex. Essentially, at this stage the researcher must consider, 'Is my representation of the participants' stories respectful?' (Wiersma, 2011, p. 213). A strength of the participatory photography approach is that it empowers participants and enables them to be actively involved throughout the research process, including the dissemination and publication of results. Because participants take photos they personally choose to share and usually are involved in deciding what, where, and how to share publicly, 'sensitivity to the dignity of participants is implied ... [provided] that they are aware of the subtleties of how images are interpreted and used' (Langmann & Pick, 2014, p. 711). Group dialogue, with facilitation by the research team, helps to draw attention to subtleties. However, dignity is a relative social construct that is context dependent and what might be considered dignified 'in one culture could be considered an indignity in another' (p. 713; see also Lickiss, 2007, p. 29). For instance, in some communities in the Middle East and North Africa, photographing women, even when they may provide consent, can be considered an act of indignity, one that hurts the collective pride of the community. Therefore, researchers and participants need to develop a heightened sense of awareness and sensitivity towards different cultural norms,

societal traditions and values in the research context. Protecting the dignity of research participants means, among other things, respecting the participants' culture and acting in culturally appropriate ways. It also means doing research in a way that does not 'demean or reduce the person it involves' (p. 713). To this end, Langmann and Pick suggest that researchers apply what they call a dignity-in-context approach that deals with dignity issues in their situational context. Such an approach has the potential to sensitise the researchers to 'the relativistic nature of social and cultural norms' (p. 713). In our project, all photographs that were shared publically, including those online (social media and websites) were contextualised with descriptions about the purpose of the project and a caption provided by the participant.

Some photography research projects can pose serious risks to the safety of participants. For instance, working on social issues related to violence, drugs, prostitution, gangs and the like can place photographers in dangerous situations akin to the danger photojournalists face when doing investigative work or when covering wars (Peabody, 2013). Researchers and communities must assess the risks and be clear with participants about all potential risks. Similarly, the safety of photographic subjects should be taken into consideration when taking pictures of vulnerable populations and marginalised groups (Peabody, 2013). In some communities, publishing photographs of disempowered groups, such as those from the lesbian, gay, bi-, trans, two-spirit communities might jeopardise their physical safety. Hence, the importance of researchers being aware of the religious and cultural sensitivities underlying their research contexts.

One school of thought about protecting the dignity of participants is to modify the photographic images using digital technology to blur faces and disguise identifiable features in photographs. However, this practice has been critiqued by several scholars such as Susan Sontag, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Martha Rosler who, in the words of Choi (2018), argue that photography, 'despite its inherent mechanical objectivity, manipulates, distorts, and thus re-victimises the subject in its pitiless formal attention' (p. 99). The idea of distortion and manipulation can be regarded as a form of identity distortion and objectification of participants (Langmann & Pick, 2014). For Close (2007),

the original, unaltered image is the one on which interpretation of data rests and to present a defaced image would be no different from presenting interview data whose language, grammar or syntax had been altered. (p. 30)

Likewise, Pauwels (2008) argues that any tinkering with the legibility of images in order to preserve anonymity might affect the communicative strength of photographs and might result in the lost of important data (e.g. contextual background information, non-verbal information such as facial expressions and body language). Banks (2001 cited in Close, 2007) suggests that such 'fuzzy-face effect' in photographs can carry connotations of criminality especially in the Western context (p. 30). Moreover, complete anonymity of research participants using disguised images is difficult to achieve (Pauwels, 2008) particularly if these images 'can reveal important information that text or word-based methods cannot' (Clark, Prosser, & Wiles, 2010. p. 86). In our study, during the editing stage,

one participant chose to crop the image to remove the image of a person who had not given consent to be photographed but other than that one instance we did not have any need to manipulate or distort photographs to protect confidentiality.

Given the rise in social media and the ubiquitous nature of taking photos that can be uploaded and shared in an instant, there is an increased chance of unanticipated and unauthorised dissemination of digital images from the research. Posting photos to a website or social media site increases the exposure of participants' stories by reaching a wider audience thereby also extending the potential impact of the research. However, it also means those photos are no longer under the control of the participants or researchers. Neither the participants nor researchers would have control over how the photos are used, manipulated, captioned, contextualised, interpreted, re-posted, and whether the photos will generate positive or negative impressions (Clark et al., 2010; Langmann & Pick, 2014). This may lead to psychological harm (including feeling demeaned, embarrassed, worried, or upset) for the participants and possibly to others by extension (such as family members or any subject in the participants' photos). Addressing this ethical concern requires researchers to be clear with participants about this loss of control in perpetuity and having discussions about the risks over the duration of the project, not just at the dissemination stage. It is also important to make clear to participants that social media sites store information on US-based servers, making the content subject to US laws. Depending on the researchers and/or the institutional ethics review board, researchers may require a separate consent form whereby participants consent to having their photos uploaded to social media sites, specifying how the photo will be presented. Participants should expect that researchers will make every effort to ensure no sensitive, personal information is included in photos and stories that are posted to these sites, and that all participants will be given the opportunity to review and approve stories before they are posted.

As a semiotic form of meaning making, photographs can be ambiguous and sometimes hard to understand. This is mostly due to their context dependence and to the fact that they can be obscurely polysemic (Peck, 2016). Wang and Burris (1997) add that while photographs are easy to collect they are 'difficult to analyze and summarise because they yield an abundance of complex data that can be difficult to digest' (p. 375). Related to this is the unpredictability of the impact they can have on the viewer. For instance, in his photovoice project with youth from violence-affected communities in Kenya, Baú (2015) together with the rest of the research team decided not to share participant-generated photos for fear of causing unpredictable impact on members of the community. Participatory photography researchers recognise that photographs do not represent the world objectively. Photos are social constructs whose significance resides in 'the way the people involved with them understand them, use them, and thereby attribute meaning to them' (Becker, 1998, p. 74). Photos are shaped and controlled by contextual social, cultural, and political elements. They get meaning (and they can have multiple meanings) from the conditions surrounding the making of the photographs and the context in which photographs are viewed (Templin, 1982 cited in Adelman, 1998). Photographs have meanings, which can be inferred from the political, cultural, and social environments where

the image was taken and viewed. In this way, photos act not just on mechanical and cognitive levels, but also on an emotional level. From a participatory photography researcher's perspective, this is a powerful aspect of photography that helps participants visualise and share their experiences, thoughts, knowledge, and beliefs with audiences.

CONCLUSION

Ethical research practice is about producing credible and valid knowledge in an ethical way. Ethics in photography-based research is a field of landmines. Researchers are required to exert scrupulous attention and caution in addressing all the ethical issues that might potentially compromise the safety of participants and undermine the validity and credibility of the whole research. The researcher should develop an acute sense of predictability and be able to deal with ethical problems as they unfold during the research process. If anything, the discussion of the various ethical issues covered in this chapter brings to the surface the primary fact that ethical conduct of research requires [Riessman's \(2005\)](#) 'ethics-in-context approach' (p. 473). Such an approach highlights the cultural, social, and contextual situatedness of ethics and requires visual researchers to address their ethical concerns in the light of the immediate context of their research. [Clark et al. \(2010\)](#) call it 'situated visual ethics' (p. 81) arguing that 'research ethics are contested, contextual, dynamic, and ... best understood in real, concrete, everyday situations' (p. 82). Ethical research is relativistic and situated in nature and no 'one-size-fits-all ethical policy will emerge for visual research, and indeed, perhaps nor should it' (p. 89).

Besides ensuring the safety of participants and the integrity of the research process and always in the context of addressing ethical considerations, real or potential, photography researchers must strive for a research process where relations of power between the researcher and participants are levelled to the maximum. There is no such thing as a complete power-free relation between researcher and participants ([Allen, 2012](#)). One way to do this is through incorporating a participatory and dialogic approach; one that empowers participants, values their voices, and highlights their emic perspective.

We assert that participatory photography is a robust research method with huge potential. We believe the advantages outweigh the limitations for research such as our project. We hope that this chapter demonstrates the complexity of ethical issues in this research method and provides insights for researchers interested in using this method and for researchers who have already had experience with this method.

NOTE

1. The team consisted of: Oladayo Afolabi, Research Assistant; Nabiha Atallah, ISANS; Susan Brigham, MSVU; Simone Chia-Kangata, CYRRC; Louise Hanavan, Project Coordinator; Mohamed Kharbach, Research Assistant; April Mandrona, NSCAD; Hilary Thorne, ISANS; and Ryan Veltmeyer, YAC.

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