Methodology

PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

Carolin Voigt
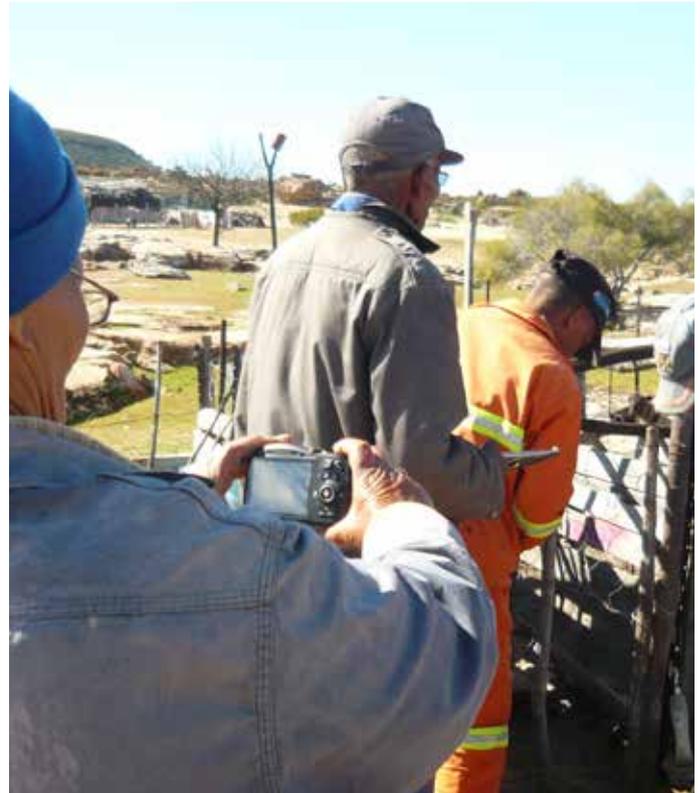
What is Participatory photography?

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

Participatory photography can be a platform for open dialogue between farmers and researchers (Photo: C Voigt)

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

The Hesselman family from Dobbelaarskop participated in the participatory video project (Photo C Voigt)

stimulate critical dialogue and facilitate communication, networking and develop capacities to act individually or collectively. Participatory photography also offers opportunities to researchers, facilitators or policy-makers to surface and confront their own assumptions and biases.

Crucial steps of participatory photography

If you are planning to introduce participatory photography to a group of people as a potential tool for exploring realties and even taking action to improve situations, it will be important to prepare the process well so that participants are able to understand its potential value and constraints. In order to do so we suggest that you follow these steps:

1. Group discussions

Ensure that all participants are aware of the purpose, possible risks and benefits of the process. Explain how to use the camera and give technical advice whenever needed to keep the level of frustration with the technical issues as low as possible. Further, the implications of taking pictures in certain situations should be discussed, taking into account concerns and sensitivities about people's privacy (cf. Wang 1999: 187f.). Plan together who will use the camera/s, over what period of time, and how they will download, select and share the images that they have collected.

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 Dobbelaarskop, Suid Bokkeveld, South Africa

In September 2013 a participatory photography process was undertaken by the community at the farm Dobbelaarskop 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 a 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

Visitors at the photo exhibition looking at photos and reading stories associated with these (Photo C Voigt)

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

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