The pictorial meaning-making in a community project in Helsinki. Freirean interpretations of a dialogical process

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Abstract

The participation in the public discourse belongs to the democratic citizenship. A part of population, however, is excluded from the common discussion. This paper describes how the photography group Camera Obs., which principally contained unemployed people in Helsinki, through a dialogical process creates pictorial voice from their own everyday life and brings it visible also to other people. The research focuses on the process from the beginning of the project to its first exhibition during the years 2004–2006. As a theoretical background, Paulo Freire’s ideas of dialogue and voice creation, combined by Vygotsky’s and Mezirow’s concept of meaning-making, have been applied. The research is conducted by participatory action research approach. The material consists of observations, interviews and photos taken by the participants. In describing the advance of the meaning-making, the method of narrative change accounting is used. The paper concludes that the group, through reflective dialogue, created a pictorial voice about its member’s lifeworlds. The photo exhibition of Camera Obs. conveyed the message about loneliness and isolation, which reached the spectators of the exhibition. To the participants of the group, the successful common photography working, the reciprocity with the audience and the publicity, gave experience and courage for the civic activity.

Keywords: community based action; photo-taking methods; meaning-making; dialogue; Freirean pedagogy
Introduction

In 2004, before mobile cameras, selfies and Facebook, some social workers in the Social Services of Helsinki City, their clients, mostly unemployed adults, and some voluntary workers, wanted to create more active and communicative practices to do social work. This created a group of photographers, called first Camera Obscura, later Camera Obs., with the aim of observing the experiences of everyday realities and making them visible also for others. The essence of Camera Obs. was pictorial citizenship discourse, which induces interaction about the formation of everyday life between different people living in different circumstances. The core of Camera Obs. consisted of citizenship activities and prevention of exclusion in the media society. Thus the participants also developed their readiness to participate as actors in media culture. In this sense, Camera Obs. ideologically joined the photo voice -family. That, as Camera Obs., uses photographing as a way of facilitating dialogue between the members and decision makers. The approach emphasises the uniqueness of individual stories and people’s experiences of their living conditions when they become experts in their environments. Thus it is close to Paulo Freire’s ideas and to critical pedagogy in general (Byrne, 2014).

Camera Obs. was included in the development work of the Social Services of Helsinki City, where new kinds of client-centered projects were combined with the basic social work. The principles of these projects, which were the empowerment, the communal and social participation and the interaction between various civic groups, illustrated the ideas of Camera Obs. and also were close to Paulo Freire’s approach to the community work (A.-K. Koskinen, personal communication 20.8.2005; M. Siponen and T. Thomasén, personal communication 28.8.2005). According to these principles, Camera Obs. was open to everybody. I, the writer of this paper, joined the group, because it provided an opportunity for applying Freirean pedagogy in the practice. Here I call Camera Obs. a community although it may not fulfil the traditional criteria – it was not constituted by locality, common history or by common environment. It was an urban community, where the criteria for communality are constituted more by the common fate: the similarity of circumstances, experiences and objectives (Williams, 2003). In the case of Camera Obs, the common fate was the unemployment.

During its activity period from 2004–2011, the group Camera Obs. organized various exhibitions and acted as an inspiring example for other groups of unemployed. In 2010, during the European Year Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, Camera Obs. was chosen for one in ten innovative projects in Finland (Mannonen, 2010). Later, when the Social Services gave up this kind of the empowerment-based rehabilitative social work in the area, the group was finished as a project of the Social Services, the material with the photos was destroyed and the group broke up.

In addition to the photographing, Camera Obs. was a development project and a research project, which has produced tools both to the social work and to the education. In the area of the social work, these tools have been discussed in some journals and in seminars. In the area of pedagogy, the project has been presented in various conferences and in three articles (Camera Obscura Group and Hannula, 2005; Hannula, 2008; Hannula, 2009), which all are concentrated on the period from the beginning of the project to its first exhibition during 2004–2006. The modus operandi of Camera Obs. and the advance of the dialogue from one’s own community to a social dialogue with external society are described in a paper by Hannula (2008). In the present paper, I stay in the same context, but I make the process deeper focusing on the pictorial voice creation and on the common reflective work (see e.g. Freire, 1972). The reasons, why I return to the same context after ten years, are first that the pictorial working itself was not analysed in previous studies. However, in the current visual culture, the skills to read pictures and to create pictorial meanings are even more important than ten years ago. Another reason is that I would like to make visible the wholeness of a collaborative project: how the participants together planned the actions, constructed dialogues, brought their own experiences to the pictorial working and entered into the citizenship discourse.

The research is conducted by the participatory action research approach. Paulo Freire’s concepts of dialogue, active citizenship and emancipatory education were adapted as a theoretical base for both the action and the research. To settle Freire’s quite theoretical conceptions closer to the description of the practical group working, I apply some issues of meaning-making by Mezirow (1998, 2000) and Vygotsky (1978).
Dialogue as a context and as an aim of meaning making

When people practice citizenship skills in their communities, they become more able to influence onto society (e.g. Dewey, 2004; Freire, 1972). According to Freire (1972), the human’s task – actually the vocation – is to participate in the creation of our common social, cultural and historical world. To Freire ‘to be a subject’ means above all to be a citizen (Hannula, 2000) and, as Freire (1974, p. 13) says, ‘… with a strong sense of social responsibility and of engagement in the task of transforming society’. Our welfare society may produce mechanisms that exclude some people from common decision-making and make them objects. Especially the life of people in economically or socially underprivileged positions is referred to from afar. They can seldom themselves tell the story of their own life and influence the presentation of its circumstances.

The process in which people take their roles as subject citizens is called conscientization. This is the process of finding the voice for silence: it requires that the people excluded from the public discussion, learn to express their own experience of reality and enter into a dialogical relationship with the shared social world (Freire, 1970, 1972).

Combining Freire’s, Mezirow’s and Vygotsky’s concepts, a meaning-making is a part of the process of conscientization. The common dialogue, e.g. in a learning group, forms a social space for exploring different kinds of attitudes, values and purposes. This creates understanding both for other people’s living conditions and for one’s own frames of references. The mutual reflective process transforms the personal perspectives of meanings and might guide future action (Freire, 1972; Mezirow, 1998, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Unlike the more psychological views by Vygotsky and Mezirow, Freire’s (e.g. 1972) concept of conscientization includes the societal action. It is evident that Freire takes also a political position in his writings (see e.g. Neumann, 2016; Roberts, 2016). In the broadest sense, Freire’s pedagogy is political because it offers participants the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life and critical agency. Thus a project might challenge participants to critically engage with the world so that they could act on it (Giroux, 2017).

Reflection is the path to the conscious action, as e.g. Dewey, Freire, Mezirow and Vygotsky highlight. It presents a person’s ability to high level thinking, especially ability to produce something new by creating connections between the experiences, thoughts, ideas and meanings (Denton, 2011). In learning situations, however, it has been found problematic to integrate reflection to practice. Sometimes a connection between experience and meaning is totally absent (Denton, 2011; Ledwith, 2007; Purcell, 2006). Especially the community-based projects have been criticized about that they in most cases focus on planning and action while passing over reflection and exploring the circumstances or the reflection stays just on a personal level. In both these cases, the discussions about wider constructions of the inequalities are missing and the action might end up in creating more societal adjustment than empowerment (Ledwith, 2007; Purcell, 2006).

Using Freire’s (e.g. 1970, 1972) words, the photos taken by members of Camera Obs. might serve as pictorial tools for reflective meaning-making, but the photos are also tools and a voice for widening dialogue outside the community. As a pictorial voice, the self-made images create multilevel interaction between a picture, the context where it has been taken and the viewers. The family photos, especially, illustrate the active role of the subjects in the photo and their influence on the viewers (Ulkuniemi, 2005).

Barthes (1985) writes that photographs epitomizing personal meanings may contain familiarity, which awakens in the viewer mental images and memories and by that initiates a dialogue between different circles of life. He writes about the two themes of a photograph, studium and punctum. ‘Studium’ refers to a field to which we are culturally connected – design, structure, the informative value of the picture, the intention that the photographer is making explicit. ‘Punctum’ is a conflict or a detail that stands out in the picture. The photographer may put punctum on a picture with a purpose, but often it occurs by chance. Studium is always encoded; punctum is not. Punctum may be something apparently accidental for the informational value of the picture. In ordinary people’s photographs just this punctum, person-relatedness and non-intentional elements, is a thing which awakens the viewer’s attention. This guides her/his interpretation about the content of the picture. The family photos give an example, how our imagination creates new meanings about the photo: when we look at them we notice familiar, but forgotten things, as clothing, facial expressions and objects on the background.
The purpose of this case-study is to describe the process of meaning-making, when the participants of the photography group Camera Obs. constructed the pictorial voice from their own experiences and joined citizenship discourse. The research observes the character of the pictorial meaning-making in two contexts: first on the community level as an internal working and then on the social level outside the community. I describe the process through two different episodes. The first describes the meaning-making inside the group; the second describes the meaning-making, when the participants create social dialogue in the context of the photo exhibition. The research questions are the following:

1. What was the process of the pictorial meaning-making of Camera Obs. like, from the group dialogue to the public exhibition?
2. How was the reflection combined to the meaning-making process?
3. What kinds of citizenship skills did the participants of Camera Obs. develop during the photography working?

The majority of the participants of Camera Obs. were unemployed adults in Helsinki area. Other participants were people, who were interested in this kind of social photographing and the social workers, who were in charge of the project in the social office. The participants joined the group by snowballing – method: the participants recommended the action to their friends, or some social workers guided their clients to Camera Obs. The total amount of the participants varied from 20 to 30 people. Most of the participants were not actively interested in photography; many of them did not even have a camera of their own. My role in the group was one of the participants, a reminder about Freirean pedagogy and a voluntary researcher, for which I had got permission from the Social Services. In the first common meeting the idea about the research as a part of the activity was discussed with the participants. The participants accepted the research. I got the permission from the participants to use photos and observations in the research. Nevertheless, the photographer has the right to deny publishing her/his own photos. During the period of the research, the group met once a month to view photos together on a screen, discuss them and to make plans. As a part of the social work of Helsinki, the social office offered the meeting place, the disposable cameras and the room for preparing digitalized presentations.

The research was conducted with the participatory action research approach. As a dialogical method this kind of research changes the position of the researcher and the participants. They all are involved in the process from the planning of working to the data gathering and analysis as well as interpretation of data and to the use of results (Swantz, 2004). Emanicipatory action also aims at developing critical self-understanding by observing the process and effects of one’s own actions. This leads to perceiving critically also the larger cultural, social and historical processes at the background of everyday life (Kemmis, 2010). In this project, in addition to recoding meetings and gathering data and feedback after the exhibition, some members of Camera Obs. participated in international scientific conferences, where they presented the project and organized digital photo exhibitions in Helsinki and in Groningen, (Camera Obscura, 2005; Hannula et al., 2006).

The fieldwork of the research contained the period from the first meeting to the first exhibition, altogether one and a half year in 2004–2006. The data of participative observations was gathered during the whole period. It includes the research diary, on which I wrote notes after the meetings; the accounts and minutes of meetings; the video recordings of the common watching situations; sound clips from discussions in group working and photos. Informal, oral feedbacks from the exhibitions were collected by some participants from their own initiation. In this paper, I use the accounts to construct the chronological narrative from the progress of the process. The material of the fieldwork is also used as a meta-information to comprehend the process. Two participants, Tuula and Annikki (the names are pseudo names), who actively participated in the project from its beginning, have been interviewed. The semi-structured interview was conducted individually. Although both interviewees got the same topics, the answers brought different kinds of experiences out. I classified the tape-recorded and transcripted interviews.
applying the theory bound qualitative content analysis. In the description of the results, I settled the interviewees’ experiences into the temporal episodes inside the chronological narrative, which describe the progress of the project. In addition I use selected comments by some members and media data in the episodes. All the photos in this paper have been presented in the first exhibition of Camera Obs. in 2006. Some of them have been published in other publications. The photographers own the copyrights to them. The main ethical question, both in the research and in the project, is the publicity. In the pictures, the photographers open their private lives with their homes, family members and friends to the people they don’t know. The participants were very conscious of that and, because the group aimed at the exhibitions in order to create social dialogue, the publicity and its limits had been spoken already in the first meeting and often after that. The common decision was that a participant might give her/his photos voluntarily to the common use, which applied to exhibitions, the development work of the social office and the research. However, she/he can deny the public presentation of a photo.

**Analysis and the structure of the results**

In describing the advance of the meaning-making, I apply a modified method of narrative change accounting, originally presented by Rom Harré and developed further by Laitinen (1999). In this paper I use their ideas about open and episodic description. The episodes are local and temporal periods of action, which differ from each other by the quality of action, sequential order between the actions and the participants’ tendency of seeing intentional relationships between the successive episodes. In my previous paper (Hannula, 2008), I have used the same method, but I have concentrated on the working methods in the group and especially on the dialogical process. In order to describe the continuum of the dialogical working of Camera Obs., I constructed two macro episodes with micro episodes: the first episode describes the dialogue inside the group and another episode describes the dialogue in another context, outside the community. For the research, these two episodes include different kinds of activity, material and interaction.

In this study, I apply the same two macro episodes, because they form the dialogical contexts for the meaning-making process. The first of which describes the meaning-making process inside the Camera Obs. community. This episode contains the photography, working in the large group for the sharing of the photos between participants with concomitant discussions, choosing the pictures for the exhibition and working in small groups. The second episode describes the external widening of the dialogue over the group boundaries towards the discourse of audience and media. This period included preparation of the exhibition, interaction with audience, handling the publicity, and evaluations of the consequences of the project.

**Results: The language of loneliness and isolation**

*The first episode: Working in the group as a reflective practice*

In the first meeting, the group selected ‘Everyday life’ to be the common theme for photographing and decided to aim for an exhibition. In the discussion, the principle of the photography working arouse from the idea that we live in the same world, but we do not see it on the same way. Through photography working we could create understanding between the different living conditions. In the same meeting, I presented Freirean approach to the community work, and because his ideas were close to these of the presented by the other participants, the approach was accepted to be a principle of working. The monthly meetings with the large group, where the photos were viewed together on a screen, formed the basic common activity.

The meaning-making developed by working with pictures: through taking photos, presenting, watching and interpreting them and finally selecting photos for the exhibition. Almost 800 photos were taken and looked together in the group, most of them many times. In this paper, I assume that the meanings are constructed; we look at pictures through our personal, social and cultural lens (Rose, 2001; Seppänen, 2005). Rose identifies three sites on meanings within images: the story of the production of an image, the image itself, and how it is read by the audience. All these contain different kinds of stories, interrogations and interpretations. Thus the images, constructed by a photo-taker, will be re-constructed in the dialogical situation of the watching (see Kondo and Sjöberg, 2013; Ånggård, 2006).
A visual content analysis (e.g., Rose, 2001; Seppänen, 2005) of the pictures brought forward the most common themes: home life, shopping, children, food and cooking, friendship, favorite places, city life and public transport and relaxation. Nevertheless, the content gets its character in different contexts. For instance the food could relate to a common feast, fast food eaten on a bench in a park, or a sandwich in a hall of residence. The food can be purchased from a market sale basket or taken from a congregational food line (Examples of the theme in Figures 1–3). In the group, a photographer’s personal comments tell the individual meanings of a theme and the discussion shows shared experiences of this community.

Figure 1  Congregational food line.

Figure 2  Milk and sandwich in a hall of residence.

Figure 3  Fast food.
Although an interactive group is the social space for producing the shared meanings, already the individual photo taking is a reflective situation. Through the camera lens, the photographer begins to observe his/her surroundings more precisely, and begins to be more aware of her/himself as image-maker and of the situation where s/he lives. Both two interviewees, Tuula and Annikki, told how the photographing and looking at photos became eventually more systematic and became interesting in a new way, because of new challenges.

Usually I try to get the picture as I see it, but they are never like that. Behind the camera it does not look like when you see the picture. It is actually interesting that the picture, it always changes somehow when it gets ready. (Annikki)

Taking a picture can stop the photographer to perceive matters that are part of everyday life, even if they are repetitive in nature.

I photographed of the TV and there was my pal, the one without which I don’t get along, in this way. It was one of those days when I thought that this is rather boring; I thought that always the TV – but I would get mad if I wouldn’t have it. At least when one is rather poor it is the only fun. (Tuula)

The self-reflection and awareness of the own lifestyle continued, when the digitalized photos were viewed together. Annikki looked at her photos of shopping and considered:

... that has made me thinking and to notice that yes, I do look at the orange price tags and special offers. It stops one to wonder whether it really is true that I just go to see that I get the food for a little cheaper price. (Annikki)

The interviewees found it interesting to look at other participants photos. The pictures presented familiar things, but provided a new kind of understanding as well. Other people’s living conditions, despite of familiarity, presented richness of everyday life.

‘It was terribly interesting to look at them. It was just like that when most of the pictures come from the unemployed, they did not deviate so much, to be poor and like that...’ ‘... new understanding in a way. With those family pictures it is possible to peep at other people’s home life. In the end everyday life is different, although we know each other. And even if one did not know everybody one did see even their life.’ (Tuula)

A photographer takes the photo with his/her own intentions, but the conversation emphasizes also the difference of experiences. Because of the season, various pictures of Christmas were taken. Often it is presented as a family celebration and that can direct the interpretation of the content of the picture.

Tuulas picture of her Christmas provoked discussion

I had a rather good insight except for some pictures when X said that there we have solitude. Actually I kind of intended that it is the Christmas of a single person, that was about my friend. There is no family celebration if there is no family. When we discussed it the others understood that I meant that this is being together with friends during Christmas and none of them goes to his family. One sees in one way and another in another way. Although it was only about my Christmas. Someone thinks that it is loneliness, it didn’t mean exactly that. (Tuula)

Tuula did not accept the interpretation about her Christmas, but defended her right to spend the feast on her own way, although it was different to popularized media-images. A photographer has her/his own background and intentions and shows the world through her/his eyes. The photo contains theories based on image-maker’s understanding about what s/he is looking at. Although an image may contain specific aims, the interaction with audience might change the interpretation (Riessman, 2008). Another photo about Christmas, which got the name ‘A single mothers Christmas’ in the conversations (Figure 4), illustrates this.
As a multilevel experience Christmas is an example of mixed experiences, which bears many meanings. Traditionally, in Finland a man in the family has fetched the Christmas tree from the forest. Nowadays, although the tree is usually bought from the market place, the fetching is still father’s task. Referring to Barthes (1985) concept of punctum, an accidental element in a picture, in Figure 5 the saw in the woman’s hand might be the punctum, which guides the interpretation.

In the discussions of the informal small groups there occurred also reflective situations. I participated in an informal small group of 7 people, where the photographers presented their own photos to others and told stories behind them. These opened individual and even deeply personal stories. Every presenter gave also a name for his/her personal series of photos. They were ‘Play and money’, ‘As a convalescent’, ‘Christmas’, ‘Nice girl’, ‘Doings, doings’, ‘Wandering in Helsinki’, ‘Family visit’. The themes of the pictures varied, but also the atmosphere of the pictures offered emotional tones to the interpretation. According to the comments of the participants later, this kind of working in smaller groups gave insights to the other people’s way of living and awaked mutual empathy.

Harper (2002) writes that the pictures reach in the human consciousness something that the verbal questions don’t reach. The photos can produce a dialectical process between the human memory and the content of the picture. Because the people see pictures differently, the watching at them might lead to a dialogical discussion about their meaning. A participant described the process of choosing pictures for the exhibition like this:

‘... a discussion really began when it was time to choose pictures for the Camera Obs. exhibitions: only a limited number of pictures could fit in. People had to defend the pictures they liked and explain to the others why they liked a certain picture, and most importantly, what they saw in it. In this process they came into contact with different points of view, observations, lifestyles, ideals and values. People could even find out new things about their own environment.’

According to the researcher’s accounts of the observations, the first episode, during which the participants worked inside the group, formed a collaborative space, where the participants shared information, interpreted and negotiated about the contents of the pictures. Emotional expressions were accepted and the interest for pictures of others was obvious. During the first episode, the participants did not attempt to reach any shared message for the exhibition, but they attempted to find a good and versatile image of people’s ordinary living.

The second episode: The exhibition as a pictorial voice

As pointed out above, the exhibition was a central aim from the very beginning. A member said: ‘First I thought that everybody want to take photos, then I realised that some of us like to be in a picture, and some like to watch them and discuss them.’ Finally the exhibition showed that many enjoyed the arranging of it: informing, making flyers, painting racks or preparing snacks for the opening situations. Later the publicity brought new challenges. Because the exhibition of 198 pictures was organized in a hall in the Helsinki central railway station, thousands of people saw it and they really looked at the photos.
For the participants the exhibition was the absolute summit of the project. Tuula and Annikki told their feelings about exhibition.

‘Stupefying gorgeous, it was nice to do. . . . But the exposition itself was a suspenseful day; I was terribly tense although there was no reason to feel stressed. I also acted as a guide. Many acquaintances said that they had seen some of the pictures in the newspaper.’ (Tuula)

‘It was the top. Everything came with such a rapid pace, the exhibition. . . First we spoke and spoke about it and then suddenly it came. I was really that our exposition was there, I was proud of it.’ (Annikki)

These interviewees, as some other members, spent time in the exhibition and saw how people stopped to look at it. They also liked to listen to comments from the spectators. Based on the conversations among and with the spectators they concluded that closeness of the photos to ordinary people’s life and the emotional spirit in photos interested the spectators.

‘Somehow it came to that this is what people’s everyday life actually is, I heard when the spectators talked with each other that see, that’s just like us . . . ’ (Tuula)

‘. . . this is everyday life. And there were fine pictures, for instance about Christmas, how different it can be when some are among their families and some single with meat and pasta casserole and that everyday is rather distressing when it’s just walking around, just being without anything to do. . . . It tells that everyday can be really boring. . . ’ (Annikki)

‘. . . there have always been those family themes, and this was not by any well-known photographer, a professional, but ordinary people photographing their own everyday life...’ (Tuula)

The interviewees considered also the message of the photos and both of them concluded that as a whole the exhibition told about loneliness. This touched the spectators.

‘And someone came and said that loneliness shines through these pictures.’ (Tuula)

‘. . . there were so many of those lone pictures and that mainly shake that there are other lonely people who have decided to make public that this is what it is like. I guess that many found themselves sitting disheartened on a table. . . ’ (Annikki)

The exhibition got publicity in media. The main newspaper of the country gave a half-page presentation with the title ‘This is a Helsinki citizen’s Everyday’ (Figure 5); a commercial news channel mentioned the exhibition and some participants were interviewed in the radio. The publicity was upsetting and confusing, as Annikki said: ‘And then these media, they were in the news and then acquaintances called. . . All at once we got all this publicity, I was confused by it’.

Figure 5 The Exhibition in the newspaper.
This media publicity produced feedbacks as SMS messages, when one of the participants, Ahti (the name is a pseudo name), was interviewed on television. Ahti collected feedback about the exhibition, and for that he gave the telephone number for the SMS messages. These messages reflected the experiences of exclusion and feelings of being misunderstood in the political discourse. Some people in the low economic situation found that the images told about their life. They appreciated that these kinds of living circumstances had been presented, known to them but absent in the mainstream discourse.

‘One can’t afford, Ahti, even to take sauna bath, so are tight from the money.’

‘Perkele, if someone even had respect for us disadvantaged.’

‘Hello Ahti! There are really many us disadvantaged!’

The photos were noted also in the Internet. The blog of Ethnologist’s Desktop (Kansatieteilijän desktop) advertised: ‘In Helsinki railway station, periodically, there are interesting photography exhibitions. Now, 30.1.–5.2. the Everyday is made visible there. Worth of skim, say – or especially – in passing.’ And an answer to that: ‘Interesting exhibition, indeed. To me it, somehow very enormously inspires, to see other people’s domestic life. Even in the documents, I always try to peep behind the interviewees what the homes are like.’

The reciprocity with the audience brought to the actors of Camera Obs. a feeling of having done meaningful work. After the exhibition, the interviewees reported getting richness to their life. They found that the project had brought changes in their ordinary way of living and changes in perceiving their own living. Especially they both had got courage to do new things and found eagerness to participate also in other activities. They expressed comments like:

‘It (taking photos) gives meaning and purpose for walking… going around with a camera gives purpose.’ ‘It gives a structure to my life, which is pretty disconnected now that I’m not employed…’ (Annikki)

‘This has been creative-like, it has been an incredibly good experience even for me, real experience. I would like to do more something like this.’ ‘… I have the courage to try also other hobbies… it gives that kind of daring.’ (Tuula)

Because Annikki and Tuula found that the exhibition had influenced the audience, the participation gave confidence and willingness to continue civic activity.

‘One can make a difference. We have already created an influence; I believe that influence is possible, for instance through an exhibition, or by making a book or something. There are all kinds of possibilities.’ ‘… I feel that this must be continued.’ (Annikki)

‘Camera Obs. could create new matters, if something is wrong, one can make an exhibition, express one’s opinion.’ (Tuula)

On the community level, as well, the self-confidence and the feeling of empowerment increased. In the meeting after the exhibition some members of the group expressed that through the pictures they had brought out something, which was worth continuing. The group began to plan the next exhibition with a new theme (this was ‘the love’) and started co-operation with other associations.

In the process of the meaning-making, the first dialogue was the context, where the members became conscious of different kinds of phenomena in their everyday lives and found shared experiences. Nevertheless, the negotiations of the pictorial meaning-making continued in the second dialogue, in the interaction with the audience. The sentence ‘loneliness shines through these pictures’ by a spectator, was often repeated by the group members, but not until the interaction with the audience outside the community strengthened ‘the language of Loneliness and Isolation’ as a conscious message of the first exhibition.
Conclusions

The exhibition at Helsinki railway station, and the discussion which followed it, showed that Camera Obs. succeeded in adapting its photographic language to convey messages that reached other people. The photos guided spectators to homes, festive occasions, shopping, moments together with friends and children, occasions in public transport and to outdoor exercises. This Everyday was often different from that presented in the public media, it included challenges, dreariness and monotony, but also genuine joy and richness of experiences. Although many pictures were intertwined with domestic life, the everyday events were not seen from the point of view of a nuclear family, but the focus pointed towards the way of living of single people without families. Inside the pictures there arouse another message, which was an experience of living as an outsider. Also this emotional tone was comprehended. Saari (2016) analyses that loneliness is a societal phenomenon in Finland. The well-being of the society has focused on the economic standard of living, but the social relations have been forgotten. In this context, the action of Camera Obs. is political because it attempts to engage excluded people critically with the world so that they could act on it (see Giroux, 2017).

The results of the research are in agreement with Freire (e.g. 1972) and Mezirow (e.g. 1998) that the crucial reflective space for the meaning-making is the dialogue in a collaborative group. However, during the first episode, which described the dialogical working in the group, the pictorial voice was only intuitively present. The voice became conscious and was strengthened in the reciprocity with the audience. Accordingly, as Freire highlights, the interaction with the outside community is important for the practical commitment to the meanings.

Although both the participatory action research -methodology with its cyclic circle and Freire’s process of the conscientization have the separate place for reflection and these approaches are applied in many learning and community-based projects, the joining of reflection with the action has been found problematic (Denton, 2011; Ledwith, 2007; Purcell, 2006). This research suggests that the reflection is not a separate part during the learning project, but it takes place on every level, starting from the individual observation, continuing in the group and also in the interaction with the outside community.

This case study showed that the photographing together was a step to civic activity because it offered opportunities for both individual and social transformation. The action gave self-confidence and courage to the participants in taking up new challenges, and the group Camera Obs. continued the civic activity with new challenges.

Declarations and conflict of interests

This project was approved by the Social Services of Helsinki City. All participants provided informed consent and declaration forms are freely made available to the Editors, upon request.

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