Thinking Critically About Photovoice: Achieving Empowerment and Social Change

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Photovoice, as a community-based participatory action research (PAR) method, has gained immense popularity since Wang and Burris first introduced it in the early 90s, originally as “photo novella.” Developed as a component of their work with women living in rural farming communities of Yunnan province China, Wang and Burris used this method to assess women’s health and socioeconomic needs, in an effort to support improved reproductive health outcomes. Wang and Burris (1994, p. 179) explain that the purpose of photovoice “was to promote a process of women’s participation that would be analytical, proactive, and empowering.” It is undoubtedly the benefits this method provides to researchers, participants, and their communities as well as other stakeholders (such as service providers and policy makers) who have driven its popularity.

However, alongside this popularity, is a growing concern regarding rigor in the method’s application. As Gubrium and Harper (2013, p. 73) caution, “the ‘user-friendliness’ of photovoice can lead to its misuse as a ‘quick-and-easy’ replacement for long-term ethnographic engagement and immersion in fieldwork contexts.” It is this realization that shapes current discussions of photovoice. If we are to promote the aims of research approaches such as, but not limited to, critical theory, postcolonial theory, social justice research, through the use of photovoice, we have an ethical imperative as researchers to ensure that the ways in which we engage in research with communities honor their wisdom and expertise. Part of honoring this wisdom and expertise requires us to facilitate critical reflection on structurally embedded experiences, and that the knowledge emerging from this reflection is both given a platform from which to be voiced and, equally important, amplified in ways that are heard.

In this state of the method article, I review the theory and process of photovoice as a means of critically revisiting the intent and application of this method. I use this reflection to highlight contemporary critiques of photovoice. Concerns around power imbalances in the research context (Castle-den, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008), rigour of research components and related findings (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011), participant empowerment and engagement (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006), as well as meaningful dissemination of findings and the ways in which they inform change (Latz, 2017; Mitchell, de Lange, & Moletsane, 2017) are particularly relevant. This discussion of photovoice responds to these various concerns, adding to our thinking about the use and implementation of the method.

PAR as the Underpinning Theory of Photovoice

PAR is, at its core, concerned with the democratization of knowledge development as a component of social justice. It does this by ensuring that “community members are involved throughout the research process to produce data that are authentic to community experience and action (e.g., intervention) that is appropriate and has meaning” (Herganrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardoshi, & Pula, 2009, p. 687). It is a response to the recognition that elitist forms of science together with policy and service structuring, driven by outside “experts,” are increasingly failing individuals and communities (Green, 2001; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Louis, 2007). Consequently, PAR is intent on grounding knowledge making in community realities, needs, and expertise. In this way, PAR is concerned with reconnecting science with society for the purpose of social transformation (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013), where action and research converge to inform theory in ways that effectively support community advocacy for change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Such change is brought about...
largely through integrated knowledge translation and knowledge mobilization, where knowledge has emerged from critical pedagogy and citizen’s science. Bradbury and Reason (2003, p. 156) summarize PAR as “grounded in lived experience, developed in partnership, addresses significant problems, works with (rather than simply studies) people, develops new ways of seeing/interpreting the world (i.e. theory), and leaves infrastructure in its wake.”

There are four essential elements to PAR: participation, action, research, and social change for social justice (see Figure 1). These elements come together in the following way: Participation by stakeholders in a process aimed at the advancement of knowledge through a systematic research process that results in action for social change on the part of the stakeholders (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). It is specifically the interaction of research and action that is intended to result in social change. If PAR is to be effectively implemented, all four of these components require equal and critical consideration in the ways we plan and implement our projects. Each is discussed here briefly.

The idea of participation refers to engagement of people in a democratic knowledge production process (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This translates into research collaboration with individuals and communities throughout the project. Communities should have a direct say in the focus of the research and how the topic will be studied. For communities to participate fully, however, especially in the project design, they need to be aware of and understand the research process (including data gathering and analysis, knowledge translation and dissemination) as well as approaches to advocacy. Accordingly, members in the group with research expertise (ordinarily academic or professional researchers) need to find ways of sharing with research partners the information that is necessary to make informed decisions. This sharing of knowledge should equip community research partners with the information and skills needed to ensure that the appropriate research tools are selected and effectively used to meaningfully unpack the complexity of social concerns. It is important to realize that research when situated in PAR does not mean it is somehow “watered down” or reduced (Latz, 2017; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). It remains a rigorous process of knowledge production that supports and/or results in theoretical advancements, contributing to larger bodies of knowledge (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). In this way, it is separate from “action learning,” which is aimed at solving problems through local understanding. We as academics and researchers are, therefore, obligated to represent research methods and to find ways of ensuring that the implementation of research methods remains rigorous, while also establishing engaging and accessible processes amenable to the communities we work with.

This obligation brings into question the balance of responsibility and engagement within the team. Some researchers may be concerned that their active involvement in the process could detract communities and participants from participation. As such, researchers may “disengage” from the process and inadvertently retract their skill set from the collaboration. Alternatively, researchers may call their study PAR because of greater involvement by participants in, for example, directing the focus of interviews themselves through the use of elicitation methods. In these instances, however, engagement of community members as researchers and partners to the overall project is limited to data gathering. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p. 569) remind us, within PAR “power comes from collective commitment” (emphasis added). This can only be achieved through meaningful engagement of all parties—researchers, participants, and community members alike—throughout the research process (see, e.g., Liebenberg, Sylliboy, Ward, & Vincent, 2017; Reich et al., 2017).

These combined understandings of participation and research underscore the action component of PAR. PAR involves active engagement by all parties in the research process (including design and dissemination) as well as the implementation of a process that results in social action and social change (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). It is action combined with participation and research that is intended to bring about social change. Consequently, research teams need to consider the rigor of their findings, ensuring that they create a sound knowledge platform from which to advocate for change. Additionally, we need to consider the ways in which findings are shared with various audiences, ensuring that relevant messages will be clearly communicated and understood, facilitating the uptake and integration of findings in future decisions and actions (Mitchell, 2015). Understanding and integrating these various components of PAR, can support photovoice projects to achieve their aim of collaboratively developing socially relevant knowledge to be used for meaningful social change.

**The Theories Shaping Photovoice**

**Feminist theory.** Echoing PAR, Wang and Burris (1994) worked from the relational perspective that women should not be objects of studies but rather active participants. They sought a method that reflected feminist understandings of research
accountability; a method that was collaborative and inclusive of women, based on a “nothing-for-us-without-us” approach that would foster empowerment and liberation (Wang et al., 1996).

In their public health work with women in Yunnan province, they drew especially on the work of Ruth Frankenberg. Frankenberg (1988, cited in Wang & Burris, 1994) had explored the social construction of race and gender among white women and concluded that “the private, the daily, and the apparently trivial in women’s activities come to be understood as shared rather than individual experiences, and as socially and politically constructed” (cited in Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 174). In terms of their own work, Wang and Burris sought a means of exploring the taken-for-granted in daily lived experience among women in China. They were interested in uncovering the social and political constructions around the experiences of these women that maintain their status quo of marginalization and oppression. In this way, their work also reflected Smith’s (1987) standpoint theory.

These goals of collaboratively identifying the taken-for-granted and exploring the positioning of women within dominant and marginalized social discourses, as well as historical, economic, and political structures so as to promote social change, extend beyond feminism. This endeavor echoes various critical theories, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, queer theory, and the new sociology of childhood to mention but a few. To achieve comprehensive awareness and understanding of the taken-for-granted, however, requires elevated levels of group engagement. Furthermore, these goals underscore the partnership component of photovoice, where communities or research collaborators engage from the very origins of the project, directing the research focus, process, and sharing of findings (see also Castleden et al., 2008). Considerations of engagement and consciousness together with inclusivity, reflectivity, and change are reflected in the work of Paulo Freire.

Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy. The Brazilian adult-educator and philosopher Freire (1972, 1973/2002) sought to establish an egalitarian power shift in education processes. Specifically, he sought to situate students and teachers as equals, where they collaboratively cocreate knowledge through a process of collective introspection and dialogue. His goal was to facilitate a new awareness of self-in-context that could inform social change. To do this, he made use of photographs, which he believed function as a mirror to communities, reflecting everyday social and political realities that impact and shape people’s lives. He argued that in discussing the content of images, people are able to step back from their lives and engage more readily with the abstract. Simultaneously, however, he saw language as living and as action. Specifically, meaning is established via a process of naming through dialogue. As Freire explains (1972, p. 65), “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” Consequently, he argued that critical thinking is best generated by means of collective discussion of images within a group.

Freire believed that through a collective process of reflection, introspection, and discussion of images, communities would be able to uncover the social and political constructions that maintain their marginalization, and in the case of the communities with which he was working, their exploitation. They would in essence be able to achieve critical consciousness of their socioeconomic–political positioning. Here, Freire identified three levels of consciousness. The first is the magical level, where people accept their social positioning and status quo without any resistance. At the naïve level, individuals perceive and interpret their social situation as sound but unfair and corrupt. In response, they may engage in horizontal or lateral violence—blaming their peers for the social reality of their lives. Individuals who achieve critical consciousness, the third level, become aware of both the ways in which contexts are structured to maintain oppression and of the ways in which their own assumptions and behaviors may contribute to the maintenance of these oppressive systems. At this level, individuals explore ways in which they can contribute to the change of social structures through their own choices and actions. This third level of consciousness is necessary in order to facilitate meaningful change via “praxis”—informed action based on a balance of theory and practice (Freire, 1972). However, this change cannot be achieved by individuals alone. Rather it is necessary for the collective, or the community, to work together toward meaningful change. It is this theory regarding critical consciousness that necessitates group work by participants within the photovoice process in terms of both knowledge development and knowledge sharing. Wang and Burris (1994) believe that photovoice extends on these principles encouraging participants to engage with power brokers in communities to facilitate such change.

The principles of photography. In addition to Freire’s use of images, Wang and Burris (1994) also drew on the principles of documentary photography as a means of using visual representation for advocacy and social change. Aware of the ways in which such photography could continue to exploit and oppress, their work was influenced by Ewald, Hubbard, Worth, and Adair, researchers who worked actively with communities, giving cameras to participants, to document and explore lived experiences.

In addition to these influences, and echoing Freire, the argument has been well established that images can serve as signifiers of culture, highlighting values and expectations of individuals, communities, and society (Prosser, 1998; Weiser, 1983). What we choose to photograph, when and how, is shaped by what our community values as well as how we would like to reflect our lives. Similarly, interpreting images is subjective and again informed by personal meaning making frameworks and the social contexts that shape them (Dicks, Soyinka, & Coffey, 2006; Edwards, 2002; Orellana, 1999). It is for this latter reason—seeking to understand the meaning that participants bring to images—that images inspire collaboration.
between researchers and research participants in qualitative research, and why these collaborations contribute to new and deeper understandings of social issues (Harper, 2002; Liebenberg, 2009). It is also this constructed nature of representation and meaning making that situates the participant as “teacher” (Collier, 1967; Harper, 1986), again echoing Freire’s critical pedagogy.

Furthermore, images prompt a different kind of reflection on lived experiences. First, images are able to prompt emotions and thoughts about experiences in ways that narrative alone cannot (Harper, 2002). Furthermore, the act of interpreting an image creates a slower and more critically reflective space within the research process. This reflection may begin with the making of an image: “why is it that I made that photograph, in that moment?” (Liebenberg, 2009). But reflection also happens while participants think about the meaning they to attach to images: “what am I seeing in this image?”; “why is it important?”; and “how do I understand or interpret what I am seeing?” (Beloff, 1985; Braden, 1983; Duff, 1981; Grimshaw, 2001; Pink, 2001). Collectively then, images introduced into narrative research create important links that participants can use to more critically reflect on their lived experiences and to more accurately discuss and share these experiences with others (Harper, 1988; Liebenberg, 2004; Liebenberg, Ungar, & Theron, 2014).

**Photovoice in Action**

It was these principles of photography, the process of critical pedagogy, and questions inspired by feminism that informed Wang and Burris’ photovoice (1994, 1997). The result is a systematic process that, when implemented astutely, provides a “means of not only collecting rich narrative data, but also” going beyond a narrow focus on discourse into the realm of perception, experience and spatial and embodied ways of knowing the world” (Gubrium & Harper, 2013, p. 71). Wang (1999, p. 185) explains that photovoice uses reflective photography to:

1. enable people to record and reflect community strengths and concerns,
2. promote knowledge and critical dialogue about community issues and their impact on individuals through group discussion of images, and
3. reach and inform policy makers to bring about change.

It is these three aspects of reflection through making photographs, exploration of meaning through collaborative interpretation and dissemination for change, that make up the core components of the photovoice process (see Figure 2). The photovoice process entails the production of photographs by participants so as to facilitate reflection on daily experiences. Images are then collectively interpreted, and finally, resulting findings and emerging knowledge together with identified issues and resources are shared with policy makers with the intent to promote social change. However, responding to contemporary concerns regarding photovoice, in order for this process to be implemented ethically and effectively, the principles of both PAR and the theories informing photovoice (i.e., feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and photography) need to be critically considered throughout the entirety of the project.

The first component of photovoice generally involves reaching consensus on the research topic with the collaborating community (reflecting PAR and feminist theory). This initial phase is a crucial first step in facilitating meaningful partnerships and engagement, countering power imbalances within the
team (Castleden et al., 2008). The first component also involves training in photography and fieldwork ethics. Training need not focus on how to make artistic images but should definitely focus at least on the technicalities of how to make images (Packard, 2008). Following this, participants produce images individually or as a group and select those that will be used to shape the group discussions.

The second component involves collective interpretation of images by the group and related co-construction of meaning. Situated against the larger background of the principles of photography, photographs produced by participants serve as catalysts for reflective discussion in which emerging meanings and interpretations are elaborated on by the collective group. Put differently, there is a shared interpretation of personal experiences in which meaning is both embedded and co-constructed. By following Freire’s theory and by exploring why images are important, what they reflect, why these situations exist, and what can be done about it, participants can become aware of the larger social processes and conditions in which their experiences are embedded; can move through various stages of critical consciousness; are better able to highlight what is needed to alter these situations; and are better able to identify existing resources and highlight required resources. Collectively, this process can meaningfully inform knowledge development, knowledge sharing and social action in the PAR process.

To facilitate group discussion of photographs, Wang and Burris integrated the SHOWeD guide (Shaffer, 1983) as a prompt for the analysis process of component two:

- What do you see here?
- What is really happening here?
- How does this relate to our lives?
- Why does this concern, situation, or strength exist?
- How can we become empowered through our new understanding?
- And, what can we do?

The purpose of these questions is to “identify the problem or the asset, critically discuss the roots of the situation, and develop strategies for improving the situation” (Wang, 1999, p. 190).

These questions can be used to (a) understand the deeper structural issues in which experiences are embedded and the processes that maintain or uphold the status quo and (b) the actions that can be taken to bring about meaningful change as well as the resources available to engage in these change processes (see Figure 3). The first component facilitates the codifying of issues, and identification of themes and theories (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998) supporting the development of knowledge and theory. The second point relates more to dissemination and action for social change.

While many research teams elect not to use these questions in their original format (Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardoshi, & Pula, 2009; McIntyre, 2003), SHOWeD does reflect the focus necessary to identify the dynamics underlying and surrounding social issues: the social, economic, and political contexts that support ideologies and control the resources and strategies necessary to bring about change. Consequently, researchers could use SHOWeD directly or indirectly, as a guide to facilitate the discussion, moving from the more superficial review of images toward the deeper “situatedness” of the issue under investigation.

The third component of photovoice relates to the dissemination of findings. Findings should be shared in ways intended to meaningfully address highlighted issues, possibly drawing on identified resources but certainly impacting policy and related social change. Drawing on the work of Smith (1987) and her assertion that it is those who have a voice and participate in decision making that hold power, Wang and Burris (1994, p. 182) argue that “policy is the articulation of voice through the concrete distribution of resources... Whose voices participate in the policy dialogue determines which actions are chosen.” It is with this in mind, that they emphasized the dissemination component of photovoice. Similarly, it is the limited discussion of the dissemination process and its subsequent impact that has resulted in recent critiques. These concerns focus on the ways in which findings are shared publicly, the questions that shape and guide this dissemination, and the impact of this sharing in terms of achieving social change (Latz, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017). Furthermore, these concerns highlight the ethical responsibility of researchers in managing and meeting community expectations regarding change (Mitchell, 2015; Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Wang & Burris, 1994).

Authors of photovoice projects often write about “giving participants voice,” reflecting Wang’s original acronym of Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience (VOICE; Wang, 1997, p. 381). Wang (2003) explains that by using self-produced public photo exhibitions, photovoice can be used to influence how a community’s public presence is redefined and how social concerns are understood and responded to. Images can be used to initiate a dialogue about important issues, a dialogue that should result in social change. This emphasis on voice in an advocacy context asks however that we give close attention to the ways in which this voice is heard, and that the related hearing results in action.

Most photovoice projects “give voice” by means of community exhibitions. However, this dissemination process is seldom discussed in detail in published reports: How were images exhibited? How were findings reflected in the exhibited...
images? Who attended the exhibition? How did the audience respond to the shared content? And how has the exhibition informed change? These crucial questions are being highlighted and explored by researchers such as Latz (2017), Mitchell (2015; Mitchell et al., 2017), and de Lange (de Lange, Moletsane, & Mitchell, 2015; de Lange, Nguyen, & Nghiem, 2016). Indeed, these contemporary questions echo Wang’s (1999, p. 186) assertion that we need to understand “the influence of images by analysing . . . the reception of the images and the meanings attributed to them by audiences.” In order to ensure that photovoice projects add to the knowledge base and contribute to effective change, it is helpful to consider the following:

- Who are the power brokers necessary to bring about change?
- How can they be engaged in the research and related change process?
- What information will they need to do this?
- What are the best ways to share specific information with particular audiences?

Several authors, including Wang (1999, 2003; see also Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestrkon, 2004; Wang et al., 1996), advocate engaging these stakeholders right from the start of the project (see, e.g., Liebenberg et al., 2017; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). Indeed, Wang places so much emphasis on this aspect, that the inclusion of policy makers and community leaders is positioned as the first step to her work. Similarly, Nykiforuk et al. (2011) talk about “policy-maker recruitment” (p. 104), a term that underscores the importance of this component of photovoice projects. In understanding “audiencing” (Fiske, 1994), the process in which different audiences in various contexts bring their own meaning to images, we need to be mindful that “images do not shape policy in a linear or flowchart fashion” (Wang, 1999, p. 186). Rather, it is the interactions and the ways in which knowledge sharing between various actors occurs that shapes outcomes (Wang, 1999), highlighting the value of policy maker participation throughout projects (Wang et al., 2004).

Perhaps the most pressing question facing photovoice studies today is how we promote substantive engagement of power brokers in the knowledge mobilization process (Bober, 2011). Additionally, how do we study and assess the impact of this engagement and its subsequent effect on social contexts and social change (Latz, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Rose, 2016). Authors such as Latz (2017) draw creatively and innovatively on art exhibition theories to better understand ways in which to display and share images related to research findings rather than art. Drawing on similar theories, Mitchell et al. (2017) bring to our attention the complex ways in which impactful sharing of research findings is both politically and contextually shaped. Drawing on their extensive international experience, they demonstrate how even decisions around which images to share are not always simple or at times even directed by participants. They go on to highlight the importance of understanding the format in which to display images (i.e., size of images, material on which they are printed, inclusion or exclusion of captions), given practical concerns (driven by the location of the exhibition) and questions of effective communication (given both the subject matter and the audience). Their discussion implicates understanding of visual literacies and contextually informed viewing practices; how do members of the audience read and consume images? Simply displaying images without attending to these various aspects of knowledge mobilization can result in the research having no impact or even in furthered silencing and marginalization of populations (see, e.g., Bober, 2011).

This questioning of dissemination brings our attention back to the phrase “giving participants voice.” This “ubiquitous invocation” (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010, p. 198) belies the understanding that it is not in fact the method (i.e., the use of images in elicitation interviews, and the presentation of images at an exhibition) that “gives voice,” but rather the intentional and considered application of the method as a whole. “Giving voice” requires that sound research be conducted, producing reliable and valid research findings, findings that all collaborators in the project can confidently share. Similarly, this consideration brings into question who findings will be shared with, what findings will be shared with which audiences, and in what ways will these findings be shared (i.e., knowledge translation), so as to support knowledge uptake. The dissemination and social change components of photovoice are of such importance, that Wang often alludes to the need for assessment or even evaluation of the ways in which photovoice projects have impacted policy and as a result people’s lives (Wang, 2003; Wang et al., 1998, 2004). In her own writings on the Yunnan Women’s Reproductive Health and Development Program, she recounts the dissemination exhibitions and the very real changes in policy that followed (see, e.g., Wang et al., 1996). Similarly, authors who are currently reflecting on effective dissemination processes are highlighting aspects of impact assessment in their thinking (Latz, 2017; Mitchell, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Collectively, these questions of the research and dissemination process within photovoice have implications for participant empowerment. Empowerment of participants does not happen because they are provided with cameras, are asked to make photographs of their experiences, and have the opportunity to talk as a group about these images. These actions are only a part of the empowerment process. As Wang and Burris (1994, p. 180) explain, “empowerment includes at least four kinds of access: access to knowledge, access to decisions, access to networks, and access to resources.” Knowledge includes both that which is explored, unearthed, and developed through the process of image making and discussion as well as knowledge of how to conduct research, share findings, and with whom. Access to decisions includes those made within the research process (what will this study look like, how it will be implemented, who the findings will be shared with and how) as well as emerging decisions about contextual realities, available and needed services and resources, and so forth. Similarly,
access to networks includes those social networks established as part of the research but extends to those that provide social capital in the sharing of findings to support social change. These networks are also critical to the continuation of the research and advocacy process after the original research project has ended (see, e.g., Liebenberg et al., 2017; Reich et al., 2017). Strategic partnerships within social networks can support the sustainability of these projects through access to dissemination and change resources—something highlighted as a potential limitation in photovoice studies (Wang et al., 1996). The facilitation of these four kinds of access can also be achieved through the actualization of PAR and photovoice principles.

A Cautionary Note: Distinguishing Photovoice From Other Visual Elicitation Methods

There are many overlaps between photovoice and other visual elicitation methods but also important differences. As previously discussed, images can facilitate deeper reflection of lived experience. The intent of this reflection is to obtain richer data that can more powerfully illuminate participant experiences and the meaning they bring to these experiences (Collier, 1967; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Harper, 2002; Liebenberg, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2017).

A common approach in this field is the use of photo elicitation interviews. Photo elicitation interviews involve the use of photographs (pre-existing or made for the research) as prompts in individual or group interviews (Harper, 2002; Liebenberg, 2009). On its own, however, this research technique is qualitative. Research processes that are more accurately termed qualitative studies, using photo elicitation methods to gather data, are those that are conceptualized, designed, and implemented by (academic) researchers, including analysis of data and dissemination of findings. While reflecting aspects of photovoice, without being situated within a PAR framework, the method is distinct from photovoice.

Additionally, the collaboration and action components of the theory underpinning photovoice encourage deeper reflection on issues as well as the exploration of related solutions. In reflecting on their research with adolescents and a community needs assessment, Strack, Magill, and McDonagh (2004, p. 54) found that most youth in the research spoke “about the insight they gained by taking pictures of the positive and negative things in their community... that being in photovoice has caused them to think about their community for the first time.” These reflections are also often heard in qualitative elicitation studies (Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2015; Mannay, 2010; Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). The difference in photovoice is that the group work creates “opportunities in which participants can inspire each other to take better, more informative pictures; develop a collective voice; and mobilise for unified action” (Strack et al., 2004, p. 52, emphasis added), while such mobilization is not necessarily the intent of qualitative research.

Finally, the argument is sometimes made that because participants are interpreting the images included in the interviews, they are participating in the data analysis. This argument, however, negates the fact that in elicitation research the core data remain the narrative. Images and artifacts are used as mechanisms to encourage deeper reflection on lived experience and, in doing so, facilitate richer personal narratives. This is not to imply that the images or artifacts do not form part of the larger data set, but they are secondary to and supportive of the narrative. As Luttrell and Chalfen (2010, p. 197) explain, “images often represent a midpoint rather than an endpoint in knowledge production.” Even if participants do indeed assist in the data analysis, within a PAR framework this is only one component of a longer and more complex research endeavor. Again, in order to classify that endeavor as PAR, equitable and meaningful collaboration needs to occur throughout the entire study.

Conclusion

Photovoice presents an astute means of conducting research and empowering communities. Effectively implemented within a PAR framework, the approach draws on mechanisms (photography and collaborative discussion of meaning) that can facilitate deep exploration of the taken-for-granted in lived experience. Furthermore, these mechanisms facilitate critical reflection on the positioning of personal experiences within larger social, political, and historical structures in order to establish an understanding of why certain social phenomena exist within specific communities (i.e., critical pedagogy). The PAR framework combined with these mechanisms further allows for the exploration of meaningful ways in which to address and/or change social concerns. Emphasizing collaboration on multiple levels means that when used intentionally, networks are established for especially silenced and marginalized members of communities and societies to meaningfully add their voices to discussions of policy and resource allocation.

Photovoice in and of itself, however, is not guaranteed of achieving this. We cannot assume that participants will be empowered simply because we have conducted a study using this approach. Such ends are only achieved through careful consideration of how the process is implemented, ensuring that the resources and capacity exist to effectively support meaningful community engagement throughout the research and dissemination process (see also Liebenberg et al., 2017). Nykiforuk and colleagues (2011) as well as Wang and colleagues (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang & Redwood-James, 2001; Wang et al., 1998) point to the ethical complexity of photovoice projects and in particular our responsibility with regard to participant and community expectations of social change. These concerns add weight to the current critiques of photovoice, underscoring the importance of meaningful collaboration, rigorous research, and skillful sharing of findings in establishing true participant empowerment and meaningful social change. It is in these ways that photovoice stands to align with the goal of PAR to establish a citizen science aligned with community realities and needs. For those willing to work through the
process in a committed and critical manner, Photovoice is a powerful, rewarding, and highly creative approach to research and social change.

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**Notes**

1. The term “participant” rather than “co-researcher” is used throughout to make the distinction between professional or academic researchers (who bring particular research skills and resources to PhotoVoice projects) and community co-researchers (who bring particular knowledge and expertise of lived experience).

2. I use the term “community” to refer to groups of people brought together by a commonality that may include place, interest, or some other unifying characteristic.

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