



Research Article

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A Versatile Tool: Photography in the Context of Participation

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Abstract

This article deals with the opportunities and limitations of photography as a tool in participatory development research and cooperation. After the definitions and reflections on the basic terms and the introduction of the “participatory toolbox,” different possible uses of photography are discussed: photography grants access, as it endows the photographer with a specific role. The photographer gives meaning to what he or she captures, facilitating an emic perspective for the recipient. Photo documentation provides a basis for discussion and comparison and promotes the feeling of “ownership.” But also staged photography can be significant because of the creative and at the same time world-related and thus solution-oriented approach. Furthermore, photography has therapeutic potential, e.g. when it comes to identity work or mediating between different positions. However, it should be mentioned that photography has different meanings depending on the cultural context and should always be used against this background.

Keywords: participation, participatory research, development cooperation, photography, visual media

1. Introduction to Participatory Methods

The term “participation” derives from the Latin term “pars” = part and “capere” = to catch, to seize, and goes back to the late Latin compound “participation” (Georges et al. 2017). Thus, participation is about taking something or someone into account and letting them take part.

Today, participation plays an important role in many areas, for example in pedagogy in relation to the involvement of clients in change processes, in business administration – often as participation in working capital – in business psychology with regard to the shaping of decisions, in design as a chance for users to better adapt the design to their needs (Novik and Wynn 1992), and in politics as the basis for a functioning democracy. Politics is also an important root for today's understanding of participation: in ancient Greece, citizens gathered for discussions and votes in the agora and were not just welcomed but also expected to participate in the decision-making (Grieb 2008).

The epistemological basis of participatory development approaches goes back to the 1940s, pioneered also by the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Concrete approaches were developed in the 1980s, which subsequently became more differentiated (Schönhuth & Jerrentrup 2020, VI). Thus, one distinguishes between different levels of involvement of individuals or groups, for example in decision-making, in implementation, in maintaining, or in profiting from a research or a development project. In addition, there is direct or indirect participation in different outcomes.

In development cooperation, we are now convinced that sustainable and social organization of such projects requires the participation of preferably all stakeholders in the planning, implementation, management, and maintenance.

When used in research, the aim is to plan and design the research process together with the people whose lifeworld is to be researched (Bergold and Thomas 2012), thus overcoming the typical constellation of a power imbalance in research. In this context, participatory research should be distinguished from action research, which aims at the political participation of marginalized groups but does not have to be participatory in the research process (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Furthermore, participatory research can also be designed differently, for example whether only the data collection is participatory or also the interpretation of the data.

2. The Mindset

First let us define the required mindset *ex negativo*: it should not be ethnocentric, not evolutionist, should not adhere to the “*kulturkreis*” theory and should not understand cultures as containers.

Some ethnocentrism may, however, be inherent in human nature, as the experiment on the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel and Turner 1986) impressively illustrates: an in-group bias exists even under the most minimal conditions – although one can, of course, criticize the experimental setting and find examples of reciprocal enrichment.

Evolutionism was the first theory in cultural anthropology, founded by Edward Tyler in 1871 with the basic assumption that human civilizations always go through similar phases in their cultural development and that development means a directed, unilinear

development with Western society as the highest form for the time being. Other societies are regarded as relicts. This idea, even though long outdated, was formative for catch-up development.

The “kulturkreis” theory was based on geographically coherent cultural circles with the diffusionist assumption that cultural innovation originates in only a few creative places and spreads through trade, war or mission. Inherent racism is also found here, as many cultures are denied the ability to innovate.

A positive definition of the mindset involves the emic perspective, the attempt to gain the cultural inside view. The famous question posed by Robert Chambers in 1994 “whose reality counts?” sums this up and at the same time implies that there are several realities depending on the cultural inside view and that these may have to be balanced with each other.

The second aspect is the holistic view, where individual topics are not a priori and not too isolated, but are understood as interconnected.

It is then important to strive for a relativistic perspective, which can perhaps be considered the most critical requirement, since people themselves have naturally internalized cultural values. Therefore, one should be ready for self-reflection and reveal one’s own biases.

In addition, it is of course also important to “recognise [...] that your presence will not be [...] neutral” (Rambaldi et al. 2006, 106). The initiation of participatory work changes the situation, as does the presence of specific researchers or project staff.

3. Considering Various Stakeholder

Another important aspect resulting from the knowledge of cultural conditions and interconnections is the consideration of different stakeholders. First of all, the so-called target group is often by no means homogeneous. Especially in participatory undertakings that are directly linked to development cooperation, it is easy for those individuals within the target group who are relatively well off and occupy a more dominant position to instrumentalize the process for themselves. Cultural circumstances such as caste systems can also make it pointless to regard the target group as homogeneous. Consequently, it may be necessary to conduct participatory workshops in subgroups.

Another problem concerns the consideration of groups or individuals who do not belong to the target group, but who might be affected by participatory projects and might prevent them. A youth education program may run against the wishes of elderly people who see their social position threatened by better educated young people or who are concerned that such young people will leave their homes to find work elsewhere.

Finally, it should also be noted that the organization and its staff, whether it is a university, an NGO or a government organization, should also be considered

stakeholders, especially as their role is changing (Straub 2011, 8): employees of development cooperation agencies, for example, have acquired positions over years of experience that they are reluctant to give up in the participatory process. Furthermore, certain goals may be indispensable for the marketing of an organization, for which it needs certain statistics or image motifs, even if corresponding efforts are not otherwise in focus.

4. The Toolbox

A toolbox has emerged for participatory work, regardless of whether it is more research- or application-oriented (Schönhuth and Jerrentrup 2019, 87). However, this toolbox should not be regarded as a lockable box, but must be adapted depending on the subject matter, the situation, the size of the group, the goal of the study, and the cultural context.

The tools are often design to help to experience the emic perspectives of different stakeholders and to make them communicable, as well as to identify potential for improvement and to clarify possible impacts.

To achieve this, it is first important to find out the emic perspectives. Triangulation is a suitable approach for this purpose. The term refers to the “adoption of different perspectives on an investigated object [...] These perspectives can be concretized in different methods [...] and/or differently chosen theoretical approaches” (Flick 2010, 324). Thus, triangulation serves to avoid biases and to gain deeper insight. Besides methodological triangulation, researcher triangulation can also be useful in the context, i.e., working with multiple researchers who differ based on their approaches and their cultural insider-ship. Accordingly, the influence of social desirability should be reduced, but also the tendency to confirm one’s own assumptions.

Before going on to discuss the benefits of photography, it is important to say a few words about the setting of participatory training: the setting is part of the cultural situation and has an impact on the process and its outcomes. Attention should be paid, for example, to the choice of venue and its practicality, including, for example, its accessibility to different stakeholders, its size, and the availability of other equipment such as projectors, tablets, and cameras. Care for appropriate catering that fits the needs of participants also plays a role in the success of participatory workshops. Moreover, the significance of the setting is especially important, as many places are charged with meanings that remain hidden to outsiders: private rooms of influential people may imply that less influential individuals will not actively engage. Churches suggest a top-down scenario in which people only receive orders and follow the instructions of a priest or the like. Schools or colleges may be connected to negative associations of exams and imply a top-down situation as well where participants feel like students who are expected to comply with the wishes of authority. Restaurants or bars, on the other hand, are often rather informal and may offer many distractions. It can

help to change a room and its associations with different seating or decoration.

Let's now look at a few concrete tools: the toolbox includes, for example, interviews, mapping and scoring techniques, which often use local materials, but can also employ digital techniques. Network analysis can also provide interesting insights, and for issues tied to places, transects are a good choice. Especially for conflictual topics it is also useful to work with role plays. This technique is also used in psychology and should help to position oneself, but also to be able to better empathize with the situations of others through the physical assumption of roles.

5. Uses of Photography in Development Cooperation

In the following, we will now present some possibilities of how photography can be used to generate new insights for development research and cooperation with the involvement of stakeholders or facilitate the process.

Basically, a distinction can be made between working with existing photographs and pictures newly taken for a "previously determined set of topics" (Rudersdorf 2016, 112). Existing pictures may offer the advantage of being less the result of social desirability with regard to the research or project. However, existing photographs offers less active, physical, and creative involvement of participants and, consequently, do not allow for some later mentioned benefits.

Another distinguishing aspect concerns those who take photographs: the photographic material to be analyzed may have been created by different parties – both the researchers, the subjects and participants in the research, or other stakeholders (Keller 2010, 36).

In the opportunities mentioned in the following, different options may be conceivable – work with existing or new material, the camera in the hands of the target group or the researcher, or both.

Yet it should be noted that some cultural contexts are critical of photography or, more specifically, of people photography: depending on the situation, those photographed sometimes feel degraded as photographic "objects." In some cases, there are also religious ideas that attribute special power over the person photographed to the owner of a picture due to its indexicality (Strother 2013, 177ff.). In Islam, there are different assessments of photography, depending on whether the photographer is seen as the creator or whether photography is understood as an automatism that reproduces an image of the real (Naef 2007, 118 and Ibric 2010, 68). All in all, this means that not every context enables the use of every photographic method, especially when people are to be photographed.

6. Access

Even before the methodological level in the narrower sense, it should be mentioned that photography can simply offer access opportunities to places and situations that

would otherwise remain closed. To the cultural outsider, the camera offers an excuse, a pretext, by assigning the person a role that is associated with the empowerment to take pictures (Jerrentrup 2021, 45) and results in virtual ownership (Odom et al. 2011, 149). This can offer researchers or project initiators, as well as various stakeholders the opportunity to gain new insights.

Ethnologists or employees of organizations thus have the chance to quickly approach the foreign culture and – perhaps with some attractive photos – also quickly become welcome guests. Different stakeholders on site can learn something about the reality of life of other groups. This requires an introduction to the technology, and it also makes sense to use a camera that is obviously better than the cell phone cameras that may be available on site: empowerment requires the right tools.

However, even with photography as an access tool, it must be taken into account that photography creates special situations. For some people, the experience is quite positive, as will be shown below, but it is usually true that one feels tense in the face of a camera and does not behave naturally, but strikes a pose (Maleyka 2019, 9).

Another important aspect is connected to the familiarity of photography: people involved in participatory work benefit from the fact that the perception and creation of photos is quite intuitive and requires little special prior knowledge. There are no linguistic or scientific and few technological barriers: “Photography as a tool [...] negates elitism”, formulates Jo Spence already in 1995 (Spence 1995, 5) before the even easier digital technology had fully taken hold.

7. Convey Importance

Depending on the cultural context, photography can confer importance (Sontag 2005, 22). This refers both to the selection of photographic models and motifs: whoever photographs something finds it noteworthy or worthy of recording and thus elevates her or his photographic subject to an important sphere – chosen, worthy of a picture. However, this also means that researchers or project staff members can communicate status with their pictures. Used consciously, they can succeed in bringing marginalized individuals or groups to the fore, just as other photographing stakeholders can thus put their issues on the agenda in a subtle, since unspoken way. Therefore, this can bring with it the chance to give those concerned a voice. If the technical basis is explained to all and the equipment is distributed equally, photography has democratizing and empowering potential.

However, the camera can also be perceived as a “buffer against the unknown” (Thurner 1992, 35) and imply a corresponding distance to the photographed. Ingrid Thurner has criticized this with regard to travel photography, a genre that is sometimes not too far from the one discussed here. Looking at development cooperation, Clive Offley addressed this issue with his graphic and poem “The million dollar man” (Offley 1981). The criticism of photography, however, ignores the fact that the distance

conveyed by the camera can help people from outside the culture to sort and weigh the new impressions. If the photographers are stakeholders of the same cultural context, this distance can also help them to look at their world a bit more from the outside and thus to gain a new perspective and to focus better.

8. Insights

Different actors capture different photos – this fact may sound trivial. However, it refers to various levels: different body sizes allow different angles, there are different camera viewpoints, different visual preferences and different motif possibilities. In addition, there are also different cultural imprints, personalities and momentary sensitivities, wishes, fears, and plans. Thus, photos as a basis for discussion and interpretation provide a special opportunity to get to know diverse emic points of view.

With the handing over of the camera into the hands of the stakeholders, who take pictures as a basis for discussion or interpretation, as well as with the work with existing photographic material, a specific intimacy also arises: “Often, doing [...] sociological research is the process of intimate listening, of developing the difficult ‘art of listening’, that is able to extend a story and its small, private minutiae to a ‘bigger picture’ of public issues [...]. So being intimate, doing intimacy, is what research is all about” (Figueroa 2008, 76). As the statement shows, this is not only about photography, but also about other typical sociological and ethnographic methods, but photography is certainly one of the tools that represent intimacy in particular, as the captured moments are often especially meaningful for the subjects.

The fields of application can be diverse, for example, working with existing and newly created photos can help to better understand the use of places or objects by gaining insights from the perspective of those affected (Mannonen 2003, 834). As mentioned above, those affected themselves also have the chance to get an outside perspective and thus to better reflect on or explain their own behavior: a concrete methodological example is represented by “auto-driven photo-elicitation.” Here, photographs are used that show the interviewees themselves or were taken by them (Harper 2002) and the subsequent interview or conversation is “‘driven’ by informants who are seeing their own behavior” (Heisley and Levy 1991, 260).

Working with participatory-created photographs to highlight the experiences and insights of groups is also known as “photovoice” (Jarldorn 2019, 3), a term that brings to mind the proverb “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Photographs subtly give voice. This is especially important in gaining the inside perspective of particularly disadvantaged groups (Leal et al. 2018), groups that might not speak up for themselves.

The emic perspective is also in the foreground in the method “fotonovela,” a term that is not used quite identically in the literature. In this context, it refers to (participatively created) photos that are provided with speech bubbles, which are then filled in by the research partners. This can help elicit and communicate emic

perspectives. There are also fotonovelas as an educational tool. Particularly interesting about fotonovelas is the “blending of a highly entertaining and approachable narrative structure with the naturalness or realism of photography” (Kirova and Emme 2006, 154).

9. Documentation and Ownership

Of course, the first question that arises when using the keyword “documentation” is whether photography is fundamentally a suitable tool for documentation at all. It is assumed to be neutral, which makes the indispensable decisions around the medium itself recede into the background: “even still photography, an apparently objective mechanical recording medium, can be ambiguous in its capacity to ‘document’” (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, 41). The article by Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1991), in which she considers the contradictions and ambiguities of photography described as documentary under the title “Who is speaking thus?” became particularly influential, concluding that photography can never be free of its author, never free of cultural aspects and personal dispositions.

However, the genre “documentary photography” is defined by Annika Baacke in terms of precisely this aspect: according to her, a documentary photograph differs from other genres because of the message its author wants to convey, which is of general, society-related significance and goes beyond personal meanings (Baacke 2014, 44). In this context, Karen Fromm quotes the photographer James Nachtwey, who has taken pictures in war zones, saying “I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated” (Fromm 2013: 241). In this case, documentary photos serve the purpose of social enlightenment.

In the context of development research and cooperation, the motivation for photography and thus the objectivity of the image results (if at all definable) may vary, but at the center of these photographs is a reference to reality and their help to “overcome the typically fleeting nature of observation” (Basil 2011, 246). This corresponds to everyday perception, according to which photography, which can far exceed the mimetic potential of painting (Dörfler 2002, 13) and can be described as indexical in its mode of creation, is considered a reflection of reality.

Thus, in projects, photographs can serve to record situations and make them comprehensible and comparable – both synchronically and diachronically –, always on the condition that they should be critically reflected upon and not unquestioned as evidence.

However, some of the images used will also belong to more staged genres. This is especially true of people photography, if only because most people feel tense in the face of a camera and strike a pose (Maleyka 2019, 9). Yet even these poses, when viewed from the right angle, can be informative for development cooperation and research projects: for example, they reveal something about social standards, aspirational

images, or relationships between people. Ultimately, it may also be difficult to separate documentary and staged photography from one another: even staged photos, even those that have been created with a great deal of effort, communicate something about needs, desires, fears, social motives, etc., which can be revealed through shared discourse.

Here, the emotional content of photographs also comes into focus: studies on various topics have been able to show that photographs imply particular emotional attachment (Johnson 1999, Hanish et al. 2019, Ang et al. 2020). This could also strengthen the sense of ownership of the different stakeholders.

The term “ownership” implies possession, but also decision-making power and responsibility, so it is close to the concept of empowerment. Thus, if stakeholders identify with the projects, there is a higher chance of responsible and efficient handling, and stronger commitment (Lachmann 2010, 109). Through photos, ownership succeeds not only on a cognitive level, but can become truly tangible – possibly this is even more true for printed images than for virtual photos. Through the tangible production of data, authority is also implicitly or explicitly renegotiated in the research process (Emme and Kirova 2010, 176).

Moreover, photographs offer the chance of access for many people. Digital technology in particular makes them easy to store and disseminate. Therefore, it may be less likely that the data will be instrumentalized by powerful individuals alone. However, access must be guaranteed for all, i.e. the digital divide must be bridged in the case of digital data.

Of course, this raises the question of how to enable secure handling of the data, which concerns, for example, secure transmission through protected clouds, various access rights for those involved, as well as disclosure to third parties, for example within the scientific public or in the field of journalism and PR. The question of which images need to be anonymized and in what way – for example, by deleting the metadata, by blurring image areas, using bars or the like – must also be clarified jointly and responsibly.

Particular problem cases include images in which different stakeholders were involved and have different publication rights, or previously taken photos that were intended for a different purpose, as well as data or pictures from informal contexts where the communication partners were probably unaware of the research context based on informed consent (Pels et al. 2018, Unger et al 2009).

10. Therapy

In Sherry Arnstein’s much respected model of the ladder of participation from 1969, “therapy” represents a very low level, labeled as “non-participation” close to “manipulation.” This is explicitly not meant here, but therapy in the sense of the sustainable improvement of well-being.

Some aspects show that photography holds special potential to increase well-being: first of all, photography represents an experience without high access barriers, which can intrinsically motivate and also offers rapid success (Rabinowitz and Holt 2013, Schänzel and Smith 2011). In doing so, it awakens creativity (Perry 2006), which in turn has a positive effect on the psyche, as it is associated with empowerment and personal development (Mundt 2009, 97) and can foster pride, self-esteem, and mental health (see Schuster 2015, 50).

However, the connection of creative photography to actual problem-solving ability in everyday life is also important. Photography is particularly interesting compared to other methods such as painting because of its close relation to reality and especially to the limitations associated with it (Krause 1972, 42). Therefore, photographic creativity can train for the confrontations with the shortcomings in everyday life.

In addition to exercises aimed at creativity, one more concrete possibility is staging of oneself in different roles: photography creates the opportunity to present and articulate oneself in different ways, to try out and get to know oneself (Muscionico 2017). In this context, empowerment again comes into play: the photographed, otherwise the research or photo “objects,” can now put themselves in the picture, entirely in the spirit of basic participatory ideas, and show who they are, who they could be, and what they stand for (Altmeyer 2016, 21). With photos, the subjects can communicate in a multi-layered way and, due to their openness to interpretation, also remain ambiguous enough to offer a protected space.

In the context of enactment, another method of interest is physically taking on and visually enacting the roles of others to strengthen empathy. This is similar to “method acting,” where the actor seeks “emotions for a character deep within themselves” (Hänßler 2018). That embodiment can generate a better understanding of others is considered a fact: “States of the body, such as postures, arm movements, and facial expressions, arise during social interaction and play central roles in social information processing,” and especially, “bodily states in the self produce affective states” (Barsalou et al. 2003: 43). That is, staging and staged photography can help empathize with other stakeholders and thus facilitate discourse.

11. Conclusion

As shown, photography can be used in various ways for participatory research and development cooperation. When including photography, however, it has to be taken into account that not only voices but also images, “that do not fit into dominant visual frames tend to be silenced” (Fairey 2018, 111), as Tiffany Fairey shows with regard to editorial choices regarding participant-produced images. This affects different levels: the discourse in the participatory process, as well as the expectations and desires of the researcher or the marketing of the organization. Self-reflexivity and triangulation continue to be required in order to achieve the most appropriate results.

Finally, we would like to give a suggestion: in order to reflect and communicate emic perspectives, including in particular wishes, fears, motivations, etc., an exhibition, perhaps also a virtual exhibition, can provide an interesting forum. For the stakeholders concerned, this represents an appreciation of their commitment and their (artistic) expressiveness, but at the same time, such an event also gains further publicity, whereby the research or development project can draw wider circles. This could, for example, also reach those who donate money to a project or a social organization, thus establishing a discourse not just through representation but through self-presentation. However, photographs, detached from their source, can also easily lead to misinterpretation, so pictures, especially if they are to have a specific effect, need a suitable and, if possible, participatory created accompanying text. And yet, discourse should not be neglected here either: images “invites us to explore how various groups make meaning of any particular representation, and how that representation challenges dominant ideas in society” (Sensoy 2010, 51).

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