

## SOCIAL WORK AND PARTICIPATORY METHOD OF EMPOWERING –PHOTOVOICE<sup>1</sup>

**Aneta Ostaszewska**

*University of Warsaw (Poland)*

### **Abstract**

This article is the overall review of photovoice, the strategy of participatory action research that relies on potential of photography. Therefore, the history, inspirations and application examples are discussed. The notion of the article is the argument that photovoice is a valuable method that could be applied in social work, which is focused on empowering people and supporting them in life challenges. KEY WORDS: social work, photovoice, empowering, participatory action research, documentary photography, critical consciousness

### **Anotacija**

Straipsnyje pateikiama fotobalso metodo apžvalga ir pristatomas veiklos tyrimas dalyvaujant, pagrįstas fotografijos galimybėmis. Aptariamos šio metodo ištakos ir jo taikymo galimybės. Straipsnyje pristatomas fotobalso metodas yra vertingas ir gali būti prasmingai taikomas socialiniame darbe, siekiant įgalinti žmones gyvenimo pokyčiams.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: socialinis darbas, fotobalso metodas, įgalinimas, veiklos tyrimas dalyvaujant, dokumentinė fotografija, kritinė sąmonė.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15181/tbb.v79i2.1778>

### **Introduction**

Photographs can be an empowering tool. Through stories they show, they can inspire changes and bring the attention of public and decision-makers. Photovoice, the method of research and work with the community, group and individual, relies on that potential of photography. It combines three key elements: documentary photography, methodological assumptions of participatory action research method (PAR) and the critical arguments of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Oppressed* (1970), in particular his notion of the power of critical consciousness (Wang, 1999).

This article is the overall review of photovoice, its history and the application examples. The notion of the article is the argument that photovoice is a valuable method that could be applied in social work, which is focused on empowering people and supporting them in life challenges.

The article is divided into four parts: in the first part, a general outline of documentary photography and its role in shaping knowledge about social reality are

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks must go to my student Jagoda Zielińska who has contributed to this article. She has brought my attention to Photovoice and helped me in the process of collecting the materials.

be described, in the second part – the main assumptions of PAR, then, in the their part the ideas and inspirations of photovoice are discussed, and in the last, fourth part, the examples of participation photography research and the usefulness of this method in social work are presented.

## **1. The power of the documentary photography**

Documentary, or social, photography is a photography that has social functions and the status of a complementary tool in the qualitative social research. By documenting social issues, it aims at making people aware of the social situations. The value of this kind of photography lies in its authenticity. The studies of Jacob A. Riis and Lewis W. Hine are considered now to be the most important works of this kind (Becker, 1995). These authors, professional photographers, documented the living conditions of workers, immigrants and homeless people, the poorest residents of the United States in the early 1920s.

From the very beginning the documentary photography focused on social problems, in particular, the living conditions of the inhabitants of large metropolises, violence, poverty, child labour, etc. They served as „moral” and often contributed to the changes of socio-political system. As Martha Rosler argues: “Documentary photography has come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery” (1992, p. 303). Among other things, after a series of photographs of Lewis W. Hine which presented children’s work, the American Congress “passed the Keating-Owens Act, legislation that placed restrictions on employing children less than fourteen years of age in factories and shops” (Sztó, 2008, p. 102).

From the 1970s the attention of social researchers, particularly those involved in the symbolic interactionism, was targeted to the photography as the main research tool. Erving Goffman, Douglas Harper, and Phyllis Ewen undertook projects using photography claiming the photos as a basic component of culture. Erving Goffman initiated the study of advertisements, including photographs of women and men (Gender Advertisements, 1976); Douglas Harper made a project on “living on the road”, portraying the homeless in Boston (Good Company: A Tramp Life, 1982), and Phyllis Ewen described the “beauty rituals” of white and black women, comparing their photographs taken at the hairdresser and at the beauty salon (1979). From that moment on, one can say that photography is no longer only as illustration in social research; it has become an important tool and even the main subject of research.

## 2. Participatory action research (PAR)

Participatory action research (PAR) emphasizes participation, action and research. The main idea is that it is performed ‘with’ people and not ‘for’ them. There are many definitions of PAR. For example, Davydd Greenwood, William Foote Whyte and Ira Harkavy claim, that it is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations. It is an ongoing organizational learning process, a research approach that emphasizes co-learning, participation and organizational transformation (Greenwood et al, 1993, p. 175).

Participatory action research has democratic orientation in order to social and organizational change.

Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury argue that action research aims “to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing” (2008, p. 1). It is grounded in bringing together action and reflection in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of individuals and communities. What is worth notice, it “does not start from a desire of changing others ‘out there’, although it may eventually have that result, rather it starts from an orientation of change with others” (2008, p. 1). Reason and Bradbury describe the underlying principles of action research as:

(1) grounded in lived experience, (2) developed in partnership, (3) addressing significant problems, (4) working with, rather than simply studying, people, (5) developing new ways of seeing/theorizing the world, and (6) leaving infrastructure in its wake (2003, p. 155).

These few citations disclose that PAR is more of an approach than a concrete method of inquiry. Having learn about different concepts and definitions of PAR, it can be concluded that PAR has some key components:

- a focus on change;
- a context-specific (generally around the needs of a particular group);
- an emphasis on collaboration;
- a cyclical process;
- participants are regarded as competent and reflexive (they participate in the entire research);
- knowledge is generated through collective actions and efforts;
- liberatory – encouragement of the participants to have a greater awareness of situation in order to take action;
- different methods of research are possible in PAR (quantitative and qualitative) [participation.wordpress.com].

PAR derives from a different range of influences, including the work of Paulo Freire.

### 3. The notion of the critical consciousness

Photovoice is influenced by two main concepts: Paulo Freire's notion of the power of critical consciousness and feminist research and theories. Freire described the concept of critical consciousness in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It refers to the process of learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions as well as to realize the experienced oppression (1970, p. 19). The other step is to take actions directed against the mechanisms of social oppression and exclusion. Freire conceptualized the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the example of educational activities conducted among the poorest people in north-eastern Brazil in the 1950s. His program was aimed at learning to write and read with the learning the critical consciousness at the same time. Awareness of one's own position in the social system is the beginning of the emancipation process. However, it cannot be done in silence. "Human beings are not built in silence but in a word, in work, in action-reflection" (1970, p. 69). Therefore, it is so important to speak freely about one's own experiences. Silence is a marker of oppression: exploitation and dehumanization, while speaking is a sign of release, a metaphor of agency.

The concept of Paulo Freire reveals how the awareness of the oppressed is raising. The first level of consciousness is magical consciousness. It is the moment of experiencing life's hardships and remaining passive; accepting the life as it is.) The next level is naive consciousness. At this level, people become aware of their own problems, have insight into themselves, but still relate to the outside world. They explain their problems as unfortunate coincidences. Only the third, last level, the critical consciousness, allows to get to the causes of problems, to see them as part of a socio-economic and political system. Therefore, the critical consciousness promotes individual change and improves the life of the community. It also leads to a change of policy and discussion of the principles of justice and social equality.

The photo could be a tool used in the process of awakening a critical consciousness. Freire in one of his educational experiments (*Operación Alfabetización Integral [ALFIN]*, Peru, 1973) uses photographs to provide illiterate people with a tool to express themselves (Boal, 1979, p. 95–135). As in photovoice, the photos are not taken by the educators or researchers but by people themselves, those who face problems of exclusion and marginalization in their everyday lives (Harper, 2012, p. 191–206). Through photography, they might become 'visible.'

Freire, describing the process of emancipation of the oppressed did not address the issue of sexual difference. Writing about the recovery of one's own voice and the agency as a result of breaking the silence, does not mean that he purposely mention women as a group closed in the culture of silence. As Patricia Maguire writes, "his conscientization tools ignore men's domination of women" (1987,

p. 87). This issue has been developed by feminist scholars. Particularly, bell hooks, based on the Freire concept, has developed the policy of women voice (1993; 2000). For feminism, the process of emancipation is connected with the raising of critical consciousness. Some scholars even claim, that feminism is more a consciousness or a state of mind than a clearly defined social movement (Rowbotham, 1973). But the feminist notion of consciousness raising differs from Freire's concept of critical consciousness. For example, the feminist consciousness raising was an effect of a group's, collective actions. Furthermore, feminist consciousness is a prerequisite to the emancipation. Apart from these differences, there are many similarities between these concepts (Bartky, 1977, p. 425–439).

Caroline Wang sees the roots of photovoice in feminist inquiry (1999, p. 185). As such it emphasizes the subjective experience of women and values knowledge that is grounded in experience. Also, it enables the women to express, communicate and reflect their everyday lives. Therefore, as Alice McIntyre writes, feminist research and theories have contributed in a significant way to the field of PAR. The feminist PAR is characterized by, among other things,

(1) an emphasis on the lived experiences of women, (2) a focus on the relationship between violence and gendered identities, (3) the activist stance of the researcher, and (4) an emphasis on social change as an integral aspect of social science research (McIntyre, 2003, p. 48).

#### **4. Photovoice and Social Issues – Women in Yunnan**

Photovoice as the use of photography in the process of raising the critical consciousness allows to reflect the reality of a person's life. The camera is used to reveal the reality through the eyes of a photographer.

For the first time, photovoice was described by Caroline Wang. According to her, it is “a process in which people identify, represent and strengthen their community and catalyse changes in it through the use of specific photographic techniques” (Wang and Burris, 1997). The use of photography goes beyond the traditional, only illustrative and complementary meaning. Participants are active subjects of change (Wang et al., 1998).

According to Wang, photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR). It is a method whose aim is to develop concrete, direct changes in the lives of individuals, groups and communities. The first application of this method took place in 1992. The first project was originally defined as photonovella (Wang, Burris, 1994). Its authors were Caroline Wang and Marry Ann Burris.

Wang and Burris conducted a research project among rural women in the Chinese province of Yunnan. It was a project within the reproductive health program –

Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program supported by the Ford Foundation (Wang, Burris, 1997). Project participants – 62 women aged 18–56 – photographed their daily lives and the environment in which they worked and lived (372). The aim of the project was to learn more about the needs of women. Equipped with cameras, they were to record everything that they thought was important or problematic and required change.

The main problem of the project was focused on the issue of reproductive health of women. The aim was to support women in understanding the importance of taking care of their health and needs. The choice of Yunnan was depended on many factors, including the poverty and the growing impoverishment of Yunnan community as well as poorly developed infrastructure.

The average number of pictures taken by each woman was one roll of a 36-exposure color film per month for 1 year (Wang et al, 1998, p. 80). During the project, the participants and employees of the women's federation met to discuss the photos and activities. Discussions were divided into three stages: 1) selection of photos, 2) interpretation, and 3) identification of social issues included in photographs.

Discussions on the photos took place in the convention of previously established questions, SHOWeD: "What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does it relate to our lives? Why does this situation, concern, or strength exists? What can we Do about it?" (Wang, 1999, p. 188). The questions motivated women to reflect on what they saw and what emotions the photos caused. In this way women became the narrators of stories they created (for example, one of the stories was concerned about the problem of access to drinking water). Their voices were heard finally.

Women's actions were to empower them and strengthened their position in the community. They were allowed to express their own opinions and emotions about the problems of their everyday life. As a result, a dialogue was initiated between the residents of the community as well as with the officials of Yunnan that had an impact on improving the living conditions and health of women.

## **5. Photovoice process**

Working with the photovoice method starts with the equipment of people participating in cameras, which are to record the world around them. The first stage of photovoice consists in the participants documenting these elements of their lives that they consider important, interesting, problematic, in a word, significant in their opinions. Equipped with cameras, they are to register the surrounding world just as they see it. However, the process of taking pictures is secondary to the stage of interpretation of the photographs' contents. Discovering meanings with other participants, confronting the problem together, and searching for its causes

as well as attempting to overcome it, constitute the main meaning of photovoice. It is a stage of group discussion – commenting, analyzing and interpreting photos. Although, there is no obligation to present all the photographs taken, each of those shown should be commented on.

Wang, as well as other researchers, emphasizes that the group discussion stage is the most important moment of photovoice (Wang et al., 1998; Böök, Mykkänen, 2014). Presenting photographs and talking about them is conducive to critical reflection, both on individual situation as well as on the whole community. Showing photos and then commenting them forces people to communicate with each other, confront, express and defend their own views.

Discussion in a group creates a space for sharing emotions and experiences, and as a consequence, it enables the development of various ways to deal with problems. Therefore, it can be argued that photovoice is an effective way to enable the identification and definition of needs and problems, especially of those people who are excluded and discriminated. These people usually do not have a sense of influence, both on their own lives and the surrounding reality (from the issues of career and work to local and political decisions at various levels).

For this reason photovoice is regarded both as a method of empowerment, for individuals and groups, especially in the case of children, women and minority groups, and as a method of developing social participation. In this sense, it is about supporting participation in the processes of shaping local politics (Wang, Burris, 1997).

## 6. Social Work and Photovoice

Wang and Burris have defined photovoice as a method that allows people to learn about themselves and their community and create the social change while actively participating in the research process. “Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (1997, p. 369). The main objectives of the method are:

- the registration of social reality;
- the promotion of critical dialogue and knowledge gained in the process of creation and action through the photos;
- the impact on decision-making bodies for social change (Wang et al., 1998, p. 185).

Photovoice has undergone numerous modifications in the last twenty years. As Wang and Burris claim, it is a flexible method that can be applied to various goals, social groups, communities and the problems (1997, p. 300). It “offers several distinctive contributions to needs assessment” (1997, p. 372). Most of all, it enables

researchers and educators to see the world from the viewpoint of the people involved in the project. "Photovoice is accessible to anyone who can learn to handle an instamatic camera and what is more, it does not presume the ability to read or write" (1997, p. 372). Today, in the situation of increased migration and the problem of refugees, and when communication among different linguistic groups can be problematic, the use of the photovoice may prove to be an effective solution. Therefore, a special area of this method might be social work, which is understood as:

a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels (IFSW, 2014).

Photovoice is a flexible method that can be easily applied to various research topics and a wide spectrum of social problems (Wang, Burris, 1997). Previous research projects using photovoice have been conducted, among others, with children and teenagers (Clark-Ibanez, 2007; Böök, Mykkänen, 2014), women (McIntyre, 2003), people with disabilities (Dassah et al., 2017), homeless people (Miller, 2006), prostitutes, members of ethnic, religious or cultural minorities (Finney, Rishbeth, 2006), people discriminated against on the basis of gender identity, as well as people with mental health problems (Clements, 2012). These examples show the value of photovoice in recognizing the specificity of many social groups and different problems (Grieling et al., 2013). As a method used in diagnosis and social education, it shows the reality seen from the viewpoints of people, thus gaining the status of authenticity and a sensitizing value.

## **Conclusions**

Photovoice is a method based on participatory photography and the interpretation by the participants themselves. In addition to providing knowledge about their subjective world, it also provides knowledge that is useful to identify the phenomena of discrimination and social exclusion. Because photovoice involves the participants directly, it is considered as a method in the field of participatory research in action (PAR). Its aim is to empower and strengthen the position of the participants as well as raise their critical consciousness, which should lead to the emancipation and the participation in the social and political issues. This objective is related to another, more general, namely, the introduction of solutions that improve the social situation and impact on social policy, especially in the context of anti-discrimination and social education.



## References

- Bartky, S. (1976). Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness. *Social Theory and Practice* 3: 425–439.
- Becker, H. S. (1995). Visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism: It's (almost) all a matter of context. *Visual Sociology* 10 (1–2): 5–14. DOI: 10.1080/14725869508583745
- Boal, A. (1979). *The theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Böök, M. L., Mykkänen, J. (2014). Photo-narrative processes with children and young people. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies* 5(4.1): 611–628. DOI: 10.18357/ijcyfs.bookml.5412014
- Bradbury, H., Reason, P. (2003). Action Research. An Opportunity for Revitalizing Research Purpose and Practices. *Qualitative Social Work* 2 (2): 155–175. DOI:10.1177/1473325003002002003
- Clark-Ibanez, M. (2007). Inner-city children in sharper focus. Sociology of childhood and photo elicitation interviews. In G. C. Stanczak (ed.). *Visual research methods: Image, society and representation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 167–196.
- Clements, K. (2012). Participatory action research and photovoice in a psychiatric nursing/ clubhouse collaboration exploring recovery narrative. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 19(9): 785–791.
- Dassah, Ebenezer et al. (2017). Photovoice and Persons with Physical Disabilities: A Scoping Review of the Literature. *Qualitative Health Research* 27 (9): 1412–1422. DOI: 10.1177/1049732316687731
- Delgado, M. (2015). *Urban youth and Photovoice: Visual ethnography in action*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Finney, N., Rishbeth, C. (2006). Novelty and nostalgia in urban greenspace refugee perspective. *Journal of Economic and Social Geography* 97(3): 281–295. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9663.2006.00520.x
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury.
- Greenwood, D., Foote Whyte, W., Harkavy, I. (1993). Participatory Action Research as a Process and as a Goal. *Human Relations* 46(2): 175–192. DOI: 10.1177/001872679304600203
- Griebling, S., Vaughn, L., Howell, B., Ramstetter, C., Dole, D. (2013). From passive to active voice: Using photography as a catalyst for social action. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3 (2): 16–28.
- Hooks, B. (1993). About Paulo Freire-the Man, His Work. In P. McLaren, P. Leonard (eds.). *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- IFSW. (2014). *Global Definition of the Social Work Profession approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014*. Available at: <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. Amherst: Center for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts.
- McIntyre, A. (2003). Through the eyes of women: Photovoice and participatory research as tools for reimagining place. *Gender, Place and Culture* 10(1): 47–66.
- Oden, M. (2013). Using Photo Voice to Teach Social Issues With Undergraduate Social Work Students. *Texas Public Health Journal* 65 (4): 7–10.
- Rosler, M. (1989). In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography). In R. Bolton (ed.). *The contest of meaning: Critical histories of photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 303–341.
- Szto, P. (2008). Documentary Photography in American Social Welfare History: 1897–1943. *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 35 (2). Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss2/6>
- Wang, C. C., Wu Kun Yi, Zhan Wen Tao, Carovano, K. (1998). Photovoice as a participatory health promotion strategy. *Health Promotion International*. Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/heapro/13.1.75

