

Article

Blurring the Boundaries Between Photovoice and Narrative Inquiry: A Narrative-Photovoice Methodology for Gender-Based Research

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Abstract

Photovoice provides alternative ways of doing research with schoolgirls, who are vulnerable and often under-acknowledged research participants. It is particularly valuable in dealing with sensitive topics such as gender-based violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses. Photovoice is thus widely employed in disciplines such as health, education, economics, sociology, anthropology, and geography. Up until now, however, it has been predominantly underpinned by participatory action research and other community-based participatory related methodologies. This article explores the possibility of blurring the boundaries between photovoice and narrative inquiry to create a narrative-photovoice methodology for gender-based research. In this study, South African schoolgirls participate as coresearchers employing narrative-photovoice and reflect on the value and limitations of this methodology for making meaning of gender (in)equity in their everyday lives. The main findings are categorized into the following themes: (a) superstition and suspicion: a gatekeeper to gaining access, (b) embracing creativity, (c) moving beyond the abstract, (d) digital versus disposable camera, (e) and having fun while learning. In the conclusion, the authors reflect on the participants' experiences of doing narrative-photovoice and highlight particular considerations for using this methodology.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, photovoice, schoolgirls, lived experience, gender-based research, narrative-photovoice, methodology

Author Note: The research described in this article was conducted as part of an international SANPAD project: *Human rights education in diversity: Empowering girls in rural and metropolitan school environments* (2010–2013), (Roux 2009).

Photographers and educators Spence and Solomon's work on *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?* (Spence & Solomon, 1995) has had a strong influence on the theory of photovoice developed by Caroline Wang. This research began in 1995 when Wang and a number of her Chinese counterparts provided sixty-two Yunnan farmers with cameras so that they could take pictures, tell narratives, and reach policy makers who govern their lives (Wang, Yuan, & Feng, 1996). Work done by Wang and Burrell (1997) in the domain of public health promotion showed that photovoice could be used to (a) enable people to record and reflect their concerns and passions in their community, (b) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about these issues in interaction with the photographs, and (c) inform research policymakers (p. 370). This and subsequent community-based participatory research (Wang, 2003; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000), empowerment research (Wang et al., 2007), and child health research (Wang & Pies, 2004) underpins photovoice. In addition, its particular value lies in raising consciousness of issues in order to bring about social change.

Other qualitative researchers have applied Wang's conception of photovoice in various landscapes and disciplines. These include nursing research (Burke & Evans, 2011; Harley, 2012), public health and other health related research (Allen & Hutchinson, 2009; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006; Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011; Shea, Poudrier, Thomas, Jeffery, & Kiskotagan, 2013), and sociology research (Barlow & Hurlock, 2013; Mukeredzi, 2011). In the field of Education in South Africa (the context of this article), photovoice has been used to bring about social change and raise consciousness in education research in general (Mitchell, 2008), as well as in research on specific phenomena such as African girlhood and HIV/AIDS (Moletsane, Mitchell, Smith, & Chisholm, 2008), teachers' experiences of poverty (Olivier, Wood, & De Lange, 2009), and challenges faced by female teachers in rural education environments (Taylor, De Lange, Dlamini, Nyawo, & Sathiparsad, 2007). It has proved particularly useful in research involving schoolgirls, who are vulnerable and often under-acknowledged research participants. Demonstrating this is a special edition of the *South African Journal of Education* (2012, Vol. 32, No. 4) entitled *Visual Methodologies in Educational Research*, which explores this approach to research, showing its value in eliciting the views of schoolgirls on sensitive topics such as gender-based violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses. This confirms the finding by Heath, Brooks, Cleaver, and Ireland (2009) that photovoice is effective in creating comfortable and safe contexts in which to talk about, become more knowledgeable about, and even raise awareness of such topics. Heath et al. (2009, p. 116) further elaborate:

[I]t is felt by many youth researchers that visual methods have a particular potential to give young people more control over the process of data generation and to express themselves in a medium with which many appear to be particularly comfortable.

By creating an opportunity for young people to become active social agents who play an important role in shaping their world and the world around them, it helps them to articulate their views. It also creates opportunities for them to explore sensitive issues that may be difficult for them to talk about (Heath et al., 2009, p. 124–125).

This relatively new form of qualitative research has proved valuable and effective across disciplines. However, photovoice is predominantly used in participatory action research and other community-based participatory related methodologies (Allen & Hutchinson, 2009; Barlow & Hurlock, 2013; Harley, 2012; Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Shea et al., 2013; Wood, 2012). Although, some work has been done within qualitative methodologies such as ethnography (Meo, 2010), visual narrative inquiry (Bach, 2008), and case studies (Ogina, 2012; Ruto-Korir & Lubbe-De Beer, 2012).

The research study described in this article breaks new ground in that it explores narrative-photovoice as an alternative methodology. We begin by describing the blurring of the boundaries between photovoice and narrative inquiry to forge a new methodology. Thereafter, we describe the research process used as well as the participants in the study in order to contextualize the main data findings. Next we explore what narrative-photovoice was able to reveal about the participants' lived experiences of gender (in)equity. The article concludes by highlighting some considerations for conducting narrative-photovoice.

Blurring the Boundaries Between Photovoice and Narrative Inquiry

In making a case for a narrative-photovoice methodology, we regard methodology as a means of situating the researcher in empirical contexts and creating a bridge between the research questions and the data (Punch, 2009, p. 112). The methodology also provides insights into "how to proceed from the findings of empirical research to make inferences" (Perri 6 & Bellamy, 2012, p. 1) about the data and to enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the data beyond just its facts. The methodology thus guides the selection of data collection methods and analyses methods so that the researcher can move beyond patterns of facts to explanations and interpretations (Perri 6 & Bellamy, 2012, p. 2). Narrative-photovoice can thus be conceptualized as a methodology as it guides the selection of data collection and analysis methods to carry out the research. Because the research study explores schoolgirls' understandings of gender (in)equity, the connections between photovoice and narrative inquiry in gender-based research will first be established. After that, narrative-photovoice will be discussed.

Photovoice and Narrative Inquiry for Gender-Based Research

In an earlier gender-based research project concerned with researching gender (in)equity (Simmonds, 2013), photovoice was used because photovoice draws on the theory of critical education (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001, p. 561). This combined Freire's approach of looking critically at the world in a dialogical account with others, feminist theory (bringing new or seldom-heard interruptive ideas, images, conversations, and voices into public forum), and a community-based approach (ordinary people using a camera/photographs to promote social change). This is in line with Warren (2005, p. 869), who urges the value of photovoice as a means of involving participants such as children, women, the elderly, and ethnic minorities whose voices have traditionally been silenced.

Narrative inquiry is also valuable when conducting gender-based research because it focuses on narratives as experiences lived and told. It is "one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35). From this perspective, narrative inquiry fosters a disposition for eliciting the lived experiences of individuals within what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) regard as a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (p. 54). In this space, researcher and participant engage in a "relational engagement" (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 541), sharing their narratives in the midst of dimensions of time and place, the personal and the social. This conception is significant for gender-based research as it unlocks personal accounts in its search to understand the lives of individuals in a particular social setting, through their experiences.

This conception of photovoice and narrative inquiry in gender-based research forms the foundation for defining narrative-photovoice as a qualitative methodology.

Narrative-Photovoice Methodology

Narrative-photovoice involves more than taking photographs and speaking about them. Mitchell (2011) argues that photographs form part of visual research that includes drawings, videos, drama, cartoons, graffiti, maps, diagrams, web graphics, and symbols (p. 12). Working with the visual is about inquiry, representation and dissemination (Mitchell, 2011, p. 4). The research

study that we are reflecting on in this article used photographs so that the schoolgirls as participants could reflect and “inquire” about their experiences of gender equity. The schoolgirls “presented” their experiences in the form of narratives on their photographs of objects, symbols, scenarios and/or situations they felt depicted what gender equity meant for them (personally and/or socially). At the end of this process, the photographs were engaged with through one-on-one narrative interviews, metadata written-narrative reflections, and in focus group narrative interviews (Simmonds, 2013).

Conceptualization of narrative-photovoice as used in this qualitative research study.

Narrative-photovoice involves juxtaposing two concepts, *photo-narratives* and *photovoice*. In this research, their conceptual underpinnings are intertwined and related (Mitchell, 2011) to give rise to what is termed, *narrative-photovoice*.

Photo-narratives, also known as “poster-narratives,” convey information through photographs (Mitchell, 2011, p. 59). More specifically, participants (as photographers) choose the photographs they regard most salient and display them on a poster, power point, display board, or in any other form that they feel is appropriate (Moletsane & Mitchell, 2007, p. 133). In many research settings, the participant conducts “oral presentations of the photo-narratives” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 66) to the researcher and other participants by way of “short captions” and descriptions (Moletsane & Mitchell, 2007, p. 133). Giving detailed descriptions of each photograph is not the objective. Therefore, photo-narratives focus on a collage of photographs accompanied by an oral explanation. We foresee that photo-narratives, because they are primarily visual, could allow the photographs to speak for themselves. This would mean that the viewer would interpret the narrative that each photograph tells. Research has already been done in which photographs are used to depict pragmatic problems and solutions related to issues such as poverty and gender inequalities, for example (see De Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007; Wood, 2012). Photo-narratives have the potential to provide “rich texts” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 66) as visual images on social, political, and economic issues. This is done, however, through photographs as the primary source of information and the explanation of the photograph, the secondary source of information.

Photovoice is a larger process in which photo-narratives are a form of disseminating the meanings *underpinning the photographs during photovoice* (Mitchell, 2011, p. 59). *Photovoice is a form of visual research that employs photographic techniques to consider “the possibilities for visualizing what is at stake (through the eyes of community photographers) and shifting the boundaries of knowledge”* (Mitchell, 2011, p. 52). Photovoice “promotes knowledge and critical dialogue about important issues” (Joubert, 2012, p. 454) from the grass roots, namely, from the participants themselves. What makes photovoice unique is its community-based and participatory approach to eliciting problems in a particular context and making suggestions for improvement (Mitchell, 2011; Wood, 2012). Lykes (2010), for example, has termed photovoice “photoPAR,” because of its emphasis on participatory action research through photography. We regard photovoice as especially significant for gender-based research in that it provides representation to the voiceless and minority voice through participatory action and problem-based research methodologies

Narrative-photovoice draws on constituencies of photovoice and photo-narratives, but is explicitly underpinned by narrative inquiry theory. As with photovoice, the objective of narrative-photovoice is to give voice to the voice-less and minority voice, but does so through narrative. Therefore, the participants reveal what is displayed in their photographs in the form of narrative. This research can take place individually and collectively. The participants’ photographs and their narrative can be displayed in the form of photo-narratives. However, it is imperative to have both the photograph and narrative, and for both to be considered by the researcher and photographer (as coresearcher) when making meaning of the topic or phenomenon being explored. Together the photographs and narratives give a voice to the photographer and demonstrate their “personal

connection to the topic” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 4). The photographer provides a detailed narrative of each photograph. To the extent that the photograph cannot speak for itself, it needs to be accompanied by a narrative. One of the prominent features of narrative-photovoice is the process and methodological framework adopted, namely, narrative inquiry. Bach’s (2008) conception of “visual narrative inquiry” shares many of these features because it is also underpinned by narrative inquiry and the use of photographs and other visuals for “living and telling one’s stories of experience” (Bach, 2008, p. 938). However, this theory uniquely applies “four camera works,” namely, “creating projective photographs, composing self-portraits, collecting culture, and looking at family albums as pictorial communication” (Bach, 2008, p. 939). Narrative-photovoice needs to acknowledge the value of these camera works. Further research could even extend the parameters of narrative-photovoice into forms of photographs beyond those taken by the participant, at the time of the research.

Therefore, narrative-photovoice methodology blurs the boundaries between photovoice and narrative inquiry. Its aim is to capture participants’ lived experiences in the photographs they take and their reflections in their accompanying narratives. The emphasis is on the in-depth accounts in an individual’s narrative and not the collective narrative of a group of participants, as is often the case of participatory action research methodologies in which photovoice commonly features.

For the research study conducted, narrative-photovoice involved five distinct stages (Simmonds, 2013):

- *Preparation stage:* This stage of narrative-photovoice is vital for participants to know what type of research is involved and what is expected of them. Olivier et al. (2009) define four central imperatives of this stage (p. 13–15). First, *conceptualize contextual issues*. This refers to discussing the research project briefly and broadly, stating the main theme(s) of the project. This background gives the participants an idea of the framework of the research. Second, *introduce the participants to the concept and the practice of narrative-photovoice*. In particular, highlight its desire to raise consciousness and promote empowered social change. Emphasize that there are no “right” or “wrong” opinions and that each participant’s experiences are significant and valuable. Third, *decide on a prompt so that the participants know what to take photographs about*. The prompt must be unambiguous. The prompt given to the participants in this research was: *Take photographs of landscapes/objects/people/situations/symbols anywhere in your school and home environment to express what you perceive and experience as gender equity*. It was emphasized that in stage one of the research the participants would be asked to share their photographs by means of photograph-related narratives. Therefore, it was essential for the participants to reflect on the prompt to arrive at a clear understanding of what they were required to do. It was also made explicit that the participants had 10 days to take the photographs. Last, *give basic training on how to use the camera and how to take photographs to the participants*. This included how to turn on the flash, how many photographs there are on a disposable camera, how to present an issue using different camera angles (up close, far away), as well as ethical protocols such as the need to ask permission before taking a photograph.
- *Intermediary stage:* A period of about three weeks was needed. Participants were given 10 days to take their photographs and the researcher had one week to collect the cameras from the participants and develop and print the photographs. The photographs were developed and printed so that the participants had the hard copies or original prints of the photographs for stage one. Without these photographs, participants would have been unable to recall the rationale for the photographs, and in effect been unable to share the experiences behind and narratives of each photograph.

- *Stage one:* One-on-one narrative interviews. To disclose the most prominent experiences of participants, they were asked to look through all 27 printed photographs and choose only five photographs for their narrative (Wang et al., 2007, p. 246). Asking the participants to narrate all 27 photographs could have been daunting for the participant as well as time consuming. If any of the photographs that were not among the five photographs chosen by the participant seemed to be potentially valuable for the study, the participant was asked to share their narratives on those also. The photographs of potential value for the study were those that portrayed unique or controversial experiences of the participants in terms of gender equity. Asking participants to share their narratives on these photographs helped them to make meaning of their experiences of gender equity. The process of “photo elicitation” (Ewald, 2001) was used to identify the photographs. Between 5 and 10 photographs could be elaborated on in the one-on-one narrative interview. For this research study, participants provided a title, a phrase, a statement, or even a question for each photograph as a way of highlighting the main idea(s) of their narrative (cf. Wang et al., 2007, p. 245). In this research study, one-on-one narrative interviews allowed individual concerns and experiences to emerge. Stage three explored these during group interaction when collective and/or individual experiences were probed in relation to one another.
- *Stage two:* This involved metadata written-narrative reflections. Metadata or “data about data” (Mitchell & De Lange, 2011, p. 121) was used as a form of reflection. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences (a) of gender equity and (b) what it was like taking the photographs. The value of written metadata for this research study is its ability to reveal how the participants experience their participation in the research, not only the research topic itself. Metadata can then reveal participants’ reflections of key features of the research. In addition, metadata can aid in the crystallization of data as it provides an alternative perspective on the research themes in the study.
- *Stage three:* Focus group narrative interviews were conducted. The reason for this is that focus group narrative interviews enable participants to share their photographs and narratives with each other and then to engage in dynamic interactions regarding the themes that have emerged in the photographs. Larkin et al. (2007, p. 36) have argued that the “SHOWED model” can be employed to direct the interaction between participants as well as participants and their photographs. The SHOWED model is an acronym for a series of questions that are analytical and action orientated. The questions are as follows: What do we **See** or how do we name this topic? What is really **H**appening? How does the narrative relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this weakness or strength exist? What are the root causes? How might we become **E**mpowered now that we better understand the problem? What can we **D**o about it? What emerged from the interactions is the participants’ voices in contention or aspiration of the phenomenon being explored. These voices are valuable because they “promot[e] among participants synergy that often leads to the unearthing of information that is seldom easy to research in individual memory” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903).

Equipment and Ethical Considerations for Narrative-Photovoice

Two central dimensions in narrative-photovoice are the equipment used and the ethical considerations.

Equipment.

Technology is constantly changing and different forms of photographic equipment (cameras, cell phones, tablets, and so on) are available (Mitchell, 2011, p. 15). In this research study each participant was given a disposable camera, taught how to use the camera and given sufficient time to take the photographs during the preparation and intermediary stages. First, the rationale for

using disposable cameras was the small scale of the research project and the limited funds available to purchase other photographic equipment such as digital cameras and cell phones. Second, the participants were from different socioeconomic contexts (urban and semirural), so it could not be assumed that they had photographic equipment of their own. Third, this research project aimed to unlock the participant's social and personal experiences of gender equity. Using a disposable camera facilitated this aim because it required the participants to reflect before they took the photograph; a photograph cannot just be deleted and replaced with another photograph, as in the case of a digital camera or cell phone, for example. Participants were explicitly told that they would be invited to write a narrative about their photographs at a later stage. Fourth, teaching someone how to use a disposable camera is easy. Other photographic equipment could be complex to use and thus require time to teach participants to use it. Fifth, the disposable cameras allowed participants to take 27 photographs each. This meant that participants knew exactly how many opportunities they had to take a photograph. This held advantages for the participant (ample photographs from which to select and narrate) and the researcher (financial implications for printing). Disposable cameras however, have some limitations. These include not being able to zoom in and out to capture something far away or very close, and having to consider the effect of light on the quality of the photographs. In this study, taking photographs took participants more time than if they had had a digital camera; they had to consider carefully before taking a particular photograph.

Ethical considerations.

Ethical considerations are central to narrative-photovoice. In addition to the usual ethical considerations in qualitative research, there are unique ethical considerations. The primary ethical principle is "respect for autonomy, promotion of social justice, active promotion of good and avoidance of harm" (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001, p. 560). This raises certain ethical considerations. Mitchell (2011) and Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) highlight the following:

- *Informed consent.* In narrative-photovoice, informed consent has three parts to it. The first is that between researcher and participant regarding participation in the study. The second is between participant and the subject(s) having their photograph taken. The third is the consent given to the researcher by participants to disseminate (in whatever form) the participants' photographs and narratives (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001, p. 564).
- *Confidentiality and anonymity.* Photographs taken by participants that depict faces of people or distinct symbols (a school badge, for example) raise ethical concerns. Failure to protect identity or a lack of anonymity could be seen as an infringement (Mitchell, 2011, p. 21). Alternatively, if consent is received from the subjects and/or places that the participant is photographing then this ethical concern is reduced. The researcher must exercise discretion and this can be done through member checking with the participant.
- *Ownership.* The question of ownership is an important one in narrative-photovoice. Mitchell (2011, p. 24) as well as Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001, p. 566) contend that the participants own the photographs that they take. The ethical obligation in this regard is met by giving the participants a copy of each of the photographs they took. In addition, each participant must grant informed consent for the researcher to use the photographs within the research study.
- *Gatekeepers and gaining access.* Based on her own research, Mitchell (2011, p. 27) highlights the ethical issues in the field with regard to gaining access to sites so that the desired photographs of places, symbols, or people can be taken. As in any study where access is required, researchers need to provide participants with the support they need to negotiate access to sites.

- *Fiction or nonfiction.* As outlined in Mitchell (2011) and Simmonds (2013), children find comfort in depicting their concerns and experiences in fictitious and staged photographs. Researchers have an ethical obligation not to allow these depictions to cause harm to participants. To meet this obligation (and in effect validity and trustworthiness requirements), the photograph and narrative must be transparent about whether the scenarios, symbols, or people depicted are fictional or nonfictional.

Before the main research findings are discussed, the research processes are outlined in order to contextualize the findings.

Enacting Narrative-Photovoice

The research study was conducted in 2011 in an inner city and a semirural secondary school in South Africa. A period of one month was spent in each school. During this period the five stages of the narrative-photovoice methodology, as described earlier in the article, were employed. In each school, the principal assisted the researchers in identifying five schoolgirl participants that came from different cultural, socioeconomic and sociopolitical backgrounds. As the larger research study focused on schoolgirls in the ninth grade, the schoolgirls were between 13 and 15 years old (Simmonds, 2013). Two of the participants were citizens of neighboring African countries, but had lived in South Africa since they began school. Besides nationality, there was religious diversity amongst the participants because they came from Islamic, Hindu, Atheist, African Christian, and Christian backgrounds. There was also linguistic diversity. Only three of the participants were English first-language speakers. The others were Setswana, Zulu, Afrikaans, or Portuguese first-language speakers, even though the research was conducted in English medium schools. Language did not pose a problem for participants when they took the photographs, but it did sometimes present a language barrier when they shared their lived experiences in written and oral narratives. As researchers, we addressed this barrier during the fieldwork by allowing participants who were not English first-language speakers to have extra time. We also asked questions designed to help them when they had difficulty expressing themselves clearly. As a result of the diversity among the participants, different perspectives emerged.

Because the participants had not been coresearchers in a narrative-photovoice methodology before, the researchers first explained what the methodology entails in conjunction with the research study's background and aims. The schoolgirls were then given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of landscapes, objects, people, situations, or symbols anywhere in their school and/or home environment to express how they understand gender equity. They were given 10 days to take the photographs. Thereafter, as is key to narrative inquiry, narration and reflexivity was done in a collaborative manner between the researchers and participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As coresearchers, they reflected on the participants' understandings of gender equity as well as their experiences of employing the narrative-photovoice methodology to elicit their understandings of gender equity.

For the purpose of this article, emphasis is placed on participants' reflections on the methodology. To unlock these reflections, participants were asked to narrate how they experienced employing the narrative-photovoice methodology, what they found valuable, and what they considered to be less valuable for eliciting their understandings of gender equity. The verbatim data were analyzed thematically to highlight the challenges and difficulties schoolgirls faced during the application of this methodology. The themes that emerged are explored in the next section. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity when analyzing and writing up the data, a pseudonym was given to each participant. The pseudonym was related to the participant's cultural background. For example, in the case of a first-language Zulu speaker, a similar-sounding Zulu name to her own

was used as a pseudonym. This form of identification involved researching common female names Setswana, Zulu, Afrikaans, English, and Portuguese families give to their daughters.

Aspects of the research process such as gaining access to research environments (namely, schools) did not pose a problem because of relationships had been established with these school environments in previous research (Roux, 2009). Once the necessary permission had been obtained from the University Ethics Committee and Department of Basic Education, permission was formally requested and granted by the two secondary schools where the study was conducted. The schoolgirls' parents or guardians, as well as the schoolgirls themselves gave their informed consent. In what follows, the exploration of the perspectives and experiences of the participants during their involvement with narrative-photovoice highlights some of the challenges this research methodology presents. It also underlines the value of this research methodology.

Main Findings for Exploring the Methodology

From the main data findings it became evident that the participants faced the following five challenges during their participation in narrative-photovoice as conceptualized by this research study.

Superstition and Suspicion: A Gatekeeper to Gaining Access

One of the participants, Tanisha, a 14-year-old Indian girl, felt that in some research environments she was unable to gain consent to take photographs of Africans because "black magic" acted as a gatekeeper. This was not the only barrier. Tanisha added that other people would not let her take their photograph because of "technology today" where programmes like Photoshop can "manipulate the pictures" and portray the person as a criminal, for instance. In her narrative, she reflected on her experience:

A lot of people are quite afraid because in today's society everything have to work with magic and from what I have heard and mostly in some cultures they believe that when you take a photo your eye's is there, so they believe that from your eyes somehow they make black magic towards you and some people also, like the security guard, the fidelity guard, he said to me that he's afraid to take the photo because people are going to frame him and scam him and tell him you know what, for example, you committed this crime, there's your photo. It wasn't true (Tanisha)

Tanisha felt that the people's reluctance to be photographed stemmed from their not believing her. They seemed skeptical or even afraid when she explained that the photographs were for a research study she was involved in.

In some instances, people did agree to be photographed. Tanisha explained that the few that consented to be photographed did so on condition that they could photograph her in return: "because [she] took a photo of them they wanted a photo of [her]." Tanisha agreed to have her photograph taken because she is not a Zulu and said she did not believe in black magic.

Other participants did not experience "black magic" as a barrier, but did find that "people didn't want their faces to be seen" (Nomsa). More common was the participants' difficulties in gaining access because, as Lindiwe said, "some people didn't allow us to take pictures of them." Bontle and Carlien described similar experiences of people refusing to grant permission for their photographs to be taken for the purpose of this research. Kholiwe had a different experience: "people were happy to help me to take the photos."

It is evident that doing narrative-photovoice in multicultural environments gives rise to unique challenges because of the diverse cultural traditions and beliefs. Fear of black magic or their photographs being misused can, therefore, be regarded as one of the gatekeepers to gaining access and consent from some of the people that participants want to photograph. In addition, it might

also be that people are hesitant to have a photograph taken because the research is gender-based and this could make them feel uncomfortable, stereotyped, or even that they are being discriminated against. Perhaps the most likely reason is people are skeptical of schoolgirls (as girls and/or as minors) being actively involved as researchers, and this might cause them to doubt the validity of the research for which the photographs are purportedly being taken.

Embracing Creativity

Burke and Evan (2011) argue that involving photographs in qualitative research can promote creativity in individuals by stimulating critical thinking and reflection. It became evident that narrative-photovoice both encouraged and inhibited the participants' creativity. Matilde explained that photographs inspired her writing and helped to unlock her ideas:

.... taking pictures they are our words, the ideas come in like someone may be passing, a lady driving a truck, that's where the idea comes out, it shows what you were thinking when you took the picture. (Matilde)

Matilde saw taking photographs as helping her convey meaning. It allowed her to translate meaning into words when she described the photographs and what they signified about the topic. This process enabled her to use her creativity. In a similar manner, Lindiwe argued that the photographs helped to give her thoughts depth and clarity when she expresses herself:

Well I wouldn't want to write an essay because I don't really like writing and I think with the pictures things are more important like than putting it in an essay because people don't read because [pictures] is much more clear Because people they like speed read and they don't get what you're trying to say, they don't go deep in to the essay.... (Lindiwe)

For some of the other participants the conditions at the time the narrative-photovoice took place were a barrier to creativity. They indicated that they would have preferred not taking photographs, but instead would have preferred writing down or orally narrating their narratives. These conditions included the contextual factors and the "comfort zone" of the participants. Bontle elaborates on the former:

I didn't enjoy it, because it was raining and I couldn't walk around taking pictures The sad thing is I didn't take many photographs. (Bontle)

Estela's response referred to her "comfort zone" as a reason for not enjoying participating in narrative-photovoice:

I didn't enjoy it because I'm actually a person who stays at home, I don't really know how the environment is, and what history, so I'm not sure of how use to it I didn't get that many ideas. (Estela)

Although research has emphasized the value of doing visual research with schoolgirls as participants and researchers (Heath et al., 2009), it is evident that some participants prefer using more traditional or nonvisual research approaches because of their particular context, or factors such as the weather.

Moving Beyond the Abstract

What was made explicit by the participants is that narrative-photovoice enabled them to gain insight into gender equity as a complex concept and its effects in their lives and in society. The expression "taking photographs opened my eyes" was common in the participants' responses. To demonstrate, the responses of three participants are presented.

I find it easier to take photographs because you can't just go and tell somebody and say you know what gender equity is; they are just going to look at you and be stunned as

I was stunned when I first heard about it, that's why I feel it is much easier to see what people feel about it I learned a lot of things of people's qualities and habits, so to me it was a wonderful experience. I learned different people's views on gender equity and how gender inequality still exists in many places. (Tanisha)

I enjoyed it and with this help I think it also opened my eyes. Opened my eyes to what it [gender equity] means. Opened my perspective of the way I look at things. (Carlien)

It helped me realize the gender equity is happening around us. It gave me a bit more experience about gender equity this opened my eyes, to see how bad everything is about equality because most of the times people don't see how things are. (Lindiwe)

These responses make it evident that photographs can help schoolgirls make meaning of complex and often abstract concepts that affect their everyday lives. Thus gender equity moves beyond mere jargon to something that relates directly to the participants' own environment and so is something that they can "see."

Digital Versus Disposable Camera

The equipment options that can be used in narrative-photovoice are constantly changing (Mitchell, 2011). This makes it difficult to reach a decision on which equipment to select. As discussed earlier, this research study used a disposable camera. Most of the participants stated that they would have preferred to use a digital camera:

I preferred a digital camera because it is easy to use. (Bontle)

I prefer a digital camera because you can see how the picture looks and as well as with the disposable cameras when you take a picture and it's blurred you don't give a clear meaning of the picture and what you want to give across. (Revati)

.... to take a picture you first have to wind and then by the time you finished winding The opportunity's passed away.... (Lindiwe)

.... I would have preferred a digital camera because there's some pictures here that have been cut off, you can't even see what you're trying to take a picture of This camera, like it took long let's say you just saw like something and you wanted to take a picture of it, you first have to like wind it up and it took long. (Nomsa)

One of the participants, however, enjoyed using the disposable camera because it made the experience more "real," fun, and a challenge:

I would say no to a digital camera because that doesn't make it fun it doesn't make it real, now that you have to take the photo, you have to be like alright, I've got to do it right and I've got to do it once right, and it gives you more optimism, it gives you more more realism and that's what makes it a serious challenge. (Tanisha)

Yet, another participant had mixed feelings about using a disposable camera.

I didn't enjoy it that much, because I want to take a picture and see it afterwards if it came out okay or not okay, but I did enjoy the excitement of seeing how it came out. (Matilde)

The question arises whether researchers using narrative-photovoice should primarily be concerned with using fast developing technology to capture children's attention and interest. Or should the emphasis be on making meaning of the phenomenon being studied, and not on the technology being used?

“Having Fun” While Learning

All nine participants mentioned that they had fun during the narrative-photovoice process. Many of them coupled fun and educational value. Research that allows learners to have fun and learn at the same time is a valuable means of encouraging schoolgirls to be active social agents who play an important role in shaping their world and the world around them (Heath et al., 2009). The responses of the participants elaborating on this experience include the following:

I did enjoy it and I got some experience about gender equity. (Kholiwe)

It was nice doing something different. Must say I learnt a lot. (Nomsa)

I had fun taking those photographs. (Bontle)

Some photos were very fun to take. (Carlien)

I enjoyed it a lot. It made me learn more about gender equity. (Lindiwe)

It was nice doing something different. I must say I learnt a lot and I think raising the awareness of gender equity should be promoted. (Nomsa)

Fun and I learnt more about it [gender equity] when taking the photographs. (Revati)

In addition to learning more about gender equity during this process, one of the participants commented that she “developed more confidence in doing tasks and [her] communication skills increased” (Tanisha). Tanisha’s comment highlights the additional value of narrative-photovoice. Namely, that it can be used to stimulate learners and create opportunities for them to develop their skills.

Reflexivity and Lessons Learnt

From the findings, it is clear that narrative-photovoice creates the space for schoolgirls to engage with the phenomenon being studied in a reflective, pragmatic, and interactive manner. It also provides an alternative approach to research on schoolgirls’ lived experiences. When reflecting on the participants’ experiences of doing narrative-photovoice, and the lessons we have learnt from these, three key aspects of this methodology emerged.

First, narrative-photovoice can be used to do research with schoolgirls on sensitive topics such as gender-related topics and abstract concepts or jargon such as gender equity. It creates an opportunity for schoolgirls to start to understand what these topics and concepts can mean in their lives as well as the lives of others (Heath et al., 2009). In terms of this research study, it is evident that a heightened awareness of “gender visibility” did manifest itself within the participants (Lorber, 2012). This helped them make meaning of “the ways in which societies, cultures, groups and individuals are gendered and how this process comes about and is maintained through the practices of organizations, cultures, groups, and individuals” (Lorber, 2012, p. 332).

Second, it is necessary to be conscious of the reasons for using particular equipment or technology when doing narrative-photovoice research (Mitchell, 2011). In this article we have asked whether the emphasis should be on making meaning of the phenomenon being studied or on the technology used to capture and give voice to that meaning. This question is imperative in view of the rapid and continuous transformation of technologies. In reflecting on the reasons many of the participants resisted using disposable cameras, we would have to concede that the decision to use only disposable cameras was a limitation. Although disposable cameras do have their uses (Simmonds, 2013), and although participants did find the research process enjoyable, educational, and enriching, the schoolgirls concerned would have preferred other forms of technology. Clearly, narrative-photovoice researchers must have a clear sense of the context in which the research will be conducted before selecting the technology for it. It is important for

participants to be comfortable and confident about using the technology provided, so that they can give voice to their lived experiences in the most effective manner possible.

Last, taking photographs for this kind of research posed a challenge for some schoolgirls. Although they were given a wide choice of subjects, most participants included photographs of people within their selection. Although the schoolgirls used the required ethical procedures, they encountered resistance from people when they asked their permission to be photographed (Mitchell, 2011). Further research on why gaining access is such a challenge needs to be conducted so that this possible limitation of narrative-photovoice can be better understood and appropriate changes can be made.

Exchanging Possibilities

Because of its wide use in research, the particular value of photovoice is in danger of being dissipated. This article highlights its specific qualities as a methodology so it can be applied more judiciously, not only with regard to research disciplines or phenomena, but also within research methodologies. Reconceptualizing it within narrative-photovoice particularizes its potential to unlock the lived experiences of participants within gender-based research (Simmonds, 2013). The challenges it presents, such as gaining access to research sites and keeping pace with the rapid developments in technology (Mitchell, 2011; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001), are outweighed by its advantages. In particular, it offers a way of researching abstract, complex, and sensitive topics. Ultimately, this article has revealed the potential of narrative-photovoice to lead to social change and raise consciousness about gender-based topics in a manner that is both fun and educational.

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