Article

Let's Play It Safe: Ethical Considerations from Participants in a Photovoice Research Project

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Abstract

The use of images and other visual data in qualitative research projects poses new ethical challenges, particularly in the context of participatory research projects that engage research participants in conducting fieldwork. Little is known about how research participants deal with the ethical challenges involved in conducting fieldwork, or whether they succeed in making balanced ethical judgments in collecting images of identifiable people and places. This study aims to increase our understanding of these ethical challenges. From an inductive analysis of interview data generated from nine participants recently involved in a photovoice research project we conclude that raising awareness about ethical aspects of conducting visual research increases research participants' sensitivity toward ethical issues related to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of research subjects. However, personal reasons (e.g., cultural, emotional) and cautions about potential ethical dilemmas also prompt avoidance behavior. While ethics sessions may empower participants by equipping them with the knowledge of research ethics, ethics sessions may also have an unintentional impact on research.

Keywords: photovoice, visual research, qualitative research, ethics, informed consent

With qualitative research methods more frequently used, debates on ethical practices in the conduct of such projects have emerged. Common ethical concerns pertaining to qualitative inquiry include the risk of subjective data interpretation, issues of social justice and voluntary participation (particularly in the context of covert research), and confidentiality of research subjects (Ramos, 1989; Shaw, 2003). Traditional strategies developed to protect the participants include written informed consent, the use of pseudonyms in research reports, and the removal of names from the interview transcripts.

In the last decade, visual research projects have gained popularity. Visual research can be defined as a type of inquiry involving different types of visual data—from two-dimensional images and photographs to three-dimensional signs, videos, or spaces (Emmison, Smith, & Mayall, 2012). The use of images and other visual data in qualitative projects poses additional ethical challenges. Not only should visual research comply with general ethical research considerations (e.g., integrity, respect for others), it should also pay careful attention to concerns about privacy, identity protection, and the use of sensitive information (Emmison et al., 2012; Wiles et al., 2008). Furthermore, the traditional means used by researchers to protect research participants have been judged inadequate, mainly because visual data are more difficult to anonymise than textual data (Clark, 2006; Pauwels, 2008; Wiles, Coffey, Robinson, & Heath, 2011). For example, the issues around obtaining informed consent from people recognizable in the pictures taken for research purposes are complex when compared to using interview, observational, or document data (Wiles et al., 2008). Yet, properly done, informed consent minimizes the threats of breaching anonymity and confidentiality of research subjects.

Ethical Considerations in Participatory Visual Research

Researchers involved in visual research projects are generally well aware of the potential ethical threats to conducting and disseminating visual research, such as consent issues, data anonymity, confidentiality of subjects, and visual data use and distribution. They make balanced judgments and limit the potential risks for research subjects. However, several visual research projects are firmly situated within a critical-emancipatory research paradigm, involving the set-up of research partnerships between research coordinators and research participants (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). This is often referred to as participatory visual research. The research participants actively take part in all phases of the project: defining the question, collecting and analyzing data, and presenting the findings to the public. One such participatory visual research approach that has gained popularity in social inquiry is photovoice research.

Photovoice

Photovoice can be defined as a "process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). It is a relatively new method, developed in the 1990s, and is often used in the context of community participatory research. The research participants are regarded as co-researchers in the project (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). The main photovoice goals are (a) assisting participants with recording and reflecting on specific issues; (b) encouraging group dialogue around these issues; and (c) influencing policy-makers (Wang & Burris, 1997). The appeal of the approach lies in its participatory nature and in its potential to empower participants by giving voice to traditionally stigmatized, marginalized, and discriminated groups such as youth (Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2006), ethnic minorities (Hannay, Dudley, Milan, & Leibovitz, 2013), and indigenous people (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008). Additionally, photovoice balances power, promotes trust and research ownership, and supports culturally appropriate research projects (Castleden et al., 2008; Hannay et al., 2013). Literature further

indicates that using participant-generated photographs as a method of photo elicitation for research purposes has several advantages. Having pictures taken by the participants contributes to developing a better understanding of the topic, facilitates discussions, and enhances participants' research ownership (Frohmann, 2005; Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). In addition, "photovoice can yield fascinating empirical data and provide unique insights into diverse phenomena, as well as empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible" (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007, p. 850).

A potential downside of this type of visual research project is that the researcher is no longer the only one in control of the fieldwork. There are several ethical issues that need to be considered in planning, conducting, and disseminating research findings from photovoice research projects, including issues related to the recognizability of people and places, ensuring research subjects' confidentiality and anonymity, and seeking informed consent from research subjects. However, research participants may be inadequately trained in judging the potential ethical risks involved in collecting images and disseminating them for research purposes. The use of images may lead to an invasion of privacy and problems with representing data or setting the boundaries for research participation and advocacy (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Taking pictures may be considered intrusive or damaging to the participants and the community at large (Riley & Manias, 2003). These considerations are particularly important when working with vulnerable populations. Most photovoice projects supplement introductory information sessions with specialized training on photography and research, as well as on potential ethical issues that may arise while conducting fieldwork (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wilson et al., 2006). Ethical briefings typically emphasize concerns related to taking and using photographic images, choosing an appropriate place and context, and asking for informed consent (McIntyre, 2003).

Objective and Research Questions

Despite the numerous sources on visual research ethics, the research participants' perceptions regarding ethics and how they apply ethical principles in practice have been inadequately examined. Discussions about how researchers may obtain informed consent from people photographed for a project are plentiful (Pink, 2007; Prosser, 2000), but little is known about how photovoice research participants (who, in most cases, are new to such projects) approach people to ask for signed consent to be photographed for research purposes, what ethical considerations they make in choosing how to display people and places in their pictures, and how they handle potential ethical threats while conducting fieldwork. This study aims to contribute to the field of ethics in visual research by addressing this gap in the literature. We respond to the invitation of Crow and Wiles (2008) to provide fuller accounts of ethical aspects of methodology, in order to feed into the ongoing debate about research ethics.

This study examines photovoice research participants' reflections on their behavior in the field in relation to the ethics of asking for informed consent and collecting images of identifiable people and places. We particularly focus on the potential obstacles and challenges participants encountered as well as the response mechanisms they have developed to deal with them whilst in the field. The main research questions that guided the study are:

1. How do photovoice research participants deal with ethical concerns encountered during their fieldwork?
2. What are the strategies used by research participants to respond to ethical challenges in collecting visual data in a participatory visual research project?

<div align="center">**Methodology**</div>

This study is a follow-up project of two master's thesis studies (Swarts, Vandenabeele, & Hannes, 2012; Wang & Hannes, 2014) that examined (1) how international students try to integrate into a Belgian (Flemish) social-cultural and educational context and (2) the challenges and opportunities they experience while adjusting to a foreign study environment. One project targeted Asian students (n=6), while the other studied African students (n=7).

Ethics Session

These two photovoice projects included a two-hour long introductory session provided for all international students who were recruited as participants. Three main parts of the ethics session included detailing (a) the study context, purpose, and process; (b) informed consent for participating in the study; and (c) research ethics related to photovoice projects. Specifically, we introduced the participants to the study and their roles, outlined potential risks, highlighted the importance of obtaining informed and signed consent to participate, discussed sensitive or vulnerable context pictures, and offered suggestions on how to avoid potential ethical problems. Examples of potentially inappropriate pictures (e.g., dirty apartments, visible underwear, environmental cues that may unintentionally reveal a person's identity) were provided to stimulate debate. Researchers projected pictures of potentially problematic situations (e.g., pictures of the "recognizable" children from one of the researchers) and used them to guide participants' discussions and reflections. Finally, alternatives to having people in the pictures (e.g., blurring, cropping, displaying parts of the body, the use of metaphors) were discussed.

Participants all signed an informed consent form agreeing to be audiotaped during individual and focus group interviews and allowing researchers to use their pictures in the projects' write-up and dissemination. The consent form was adapted from Mitchell (2011) and included information about the photovoice project (aims, procedures, risks, advantages, and participants' rights and tasks), as well as the choices and options participants had regarding (a) which photos could be credited to them in the final research paper or for which photos they wanted to remain anonymous and (b) which photos from the set delivered to the research team could be used in other than the research context—such as scientific congresses and teaching assignments—and which photos needed to be treated confidentially. Ownership of the photos remained with the research participants at all times.

Consent Vouchers for Research Participants

In addition to signing their own consent forms, participants received consent vouchers (see Figure 1), adapted from Mitchell (2011), to use while approaching research subjects (i.e., the people eventually visible in their pictures). The vouchers were selected over the more traditional consent form because they were small in size (could fit in the wallet). The rationale was that participants were more likely to carry these small cards with them at all times (as opposed to a page-long consent form) and use them as the opportunity for a picture appeared.

Participants engaged in two rounds of taking pictures in the field, participated in a subsequent focus group meeting in which the pictures were discussed, and reflected on their experiences. Participants used their own equipment to take pictures and submitted the visual data they collected to researchers two weeks prior to the focus group meeting. This timespan was sufficient for researchers to reflect on the images and cluster them into categories in order to facilitate the focus group discussion. Focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and used for data analysis (for further details on the methodology and techniques used in these photovoice projects,

see Wang & Hannes, 2014). Following these projects, participants of both studies were invited to a follow-up individual interview focusing on their experiences with and perceptions about taking pictures for the purposes of a photovoice project.

Consent for taking and using my picture

I consent to be photographed as part of the photovoice project on experiences and challenges from Asian students with integrating in a foreign culture.

I know that means my picture might be published to show the results of the study. For instance, my picture may be used:
- in a dissertation, in book chapters, on a website, in journals, in a conference presentation and all other scientific channels.
- at photo exhibitions, meetings or other non-profit public events related to this study.

Print name   **Sign here**   **Date**

Figure 1. Consent voucher.

Study Participants

The present study included nine of the original 13 participants from the two photovoice projects described above (the rest could not be reached as they had left the country by then). The participants, aged between 22 and 37, were international students who attended a Flemish Belgian university. At the time of the interview data collection, they were in their second year of studying abroad. There were four female and five male participants, coming from Asian and African countries (see Table 1). We assigned pseudonyms to assure anonymity and to protect participants' privacy.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Department	Country of origin	Previous experience with qualitative research
Mei	Female	22	Anthropology	China	Yes
Emiko	Female	22	Political Science	Japan	No
Bian	Female	27	Educational Studies	Vietnam	Yes
Chen	Male	25	Biophysics	China	No
Dong	Male	23	European Politics and Policies	Taiwan	Yes
Baruti	Male	30	Electrical Engineering	South Africa	No
Henrik	Male	30	Architecture, Urbanism and Planning	South Africa	No
Toby	Male	37	Educational Sciences	Nigeria	No
Abri	Female	30	Bioscience Engineering	South Africa	Yes

Procedures

Participants engaged in an individual interview that focused on their experiences of active involvement in a photovoice research project. Specifically, four major areas were targeted: (a) their understanding of the information covered in the ethics session; (b) their experiences of participating in the photovoice study (including, but not limited to, taking pictures, approaching subjects to ask for informed consent, selecting pictures for the project, dealing with identifiable people and places, etc.); (c) their experiences related to asking for informed consent; (d) their ethical considerations while working in the field; and (e) their thoughts on what they had learned from the project. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. We used a stimulated recall method to foster participants' reflections about what was pictured and why. Researchers who have used stimulated recall assert that the collected data was "rich in that the visual stimulus prompted participants to provide insights into their thinking and actions that would not have been possible in the more traditional data collection methods – observation and/or interview" (Zevenberger, 2005, p. 816). Although stimulated recall is typically based on using video recordings, photographs have also been successfully used (Carlsson, 2001). In this study, the interviewer displayed the pictures that participants previously submitted to the researchers. Then, participants were invited to describe where each picture was taken and what its significance was for the project.

In addition to asking participants to reflect on their experiences, the interviewer also focused on ethical aspects related to pictures and how participants dealt with recognizability of people and places in the photos. The interviewer queried participants on the specific settings and situations where pictures had been taken to better understand ethical challenges linked to a particular context. Study participants offered reflections on their involvement in the photovoice project, particularly focusing on their perceptions of ethics inherent in this type of research. The interviewer also used an informed consent voucher developed for the project to discuss obtaining signed consent from people appearing in the photos with the research participants. Participants' descriptions of photos, as well as their reflections on the overall research process, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then entered into a qualitative data analysis software program, coded, and analyzed.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

For this study we used inductive reasoning to analyze the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A graphical model (see Figure 2) was developed from the data. The analytical process started with familiarization with the interview data and focused on generating recurrent themes related to the participants' experiences with and interpretations of ethical risks pertaining to photovoice research. Specifically, we used thematic coding that involved the development of codes, themes, and theoretical constructs following the process suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003): (1) developing the codebook; (2) coding the text; (3) expanding the codebook with newly found codes; (4) selecting repeating ideas; (5) developing categories; and (6) organizing data into overarching ideas, themes, and theoretical concepts. The initial codebook included seven overarching and interrelated categories: general reflections on the project; avoidance behaviors; coping strategies; ethical considerations; informed consent issues; experiences with using sensitive information; and the picture-taking process. Two researchers independently coded the interview data; the disagreements in codes and interpretation of data segments were resolved by researchers' discussions in the data analysis project.

Sensitizing Concepts

The notion of a sensitizing concept was introduced by Blumer (1954) to characterize terms and theories that offered "a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (p. 7). Later researchers regarded sensitizing concepts as interpretive devices guiding qualitative analysis, as "those background ideas that inform the overall research problem … [and] offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259). During an initial familiarization with the data, five concepts appeared as dominant in the participants' reflections (e.g., in choosing to approach people to ask for participation consent or avoiding such contacts): (a) approach motivation, (b) approach behavior, (c) avoidance motivation, (d) avoidance behavior, and (e) coping strategies. We therefore considered them as sensitizing concepts for the further analysis and presentation of the findings. In this study, we used sensitizing concepts as a way of interpreting the participants' experiences with taking pictures for the purposes of a photovoice project. The main sensitizing concepts used for the analytic part of our study were defined based on the review of the relevant literature (see Table 2).

Table 2

Defining Sensitizing Concepts

Sensitizing concept	Definition	Literature
Approach motivation	Choosing to take an action, to actively engage in the process to reach a desired outcome related to the ethical issue encountered	Bargh, 1997; Elliot, 2006
Approach behavior	Actions prompted by positive stimuli and proactive approaches to completing the task	Elliot, 2006
Avoidance motivation	Choosing not to take an action, to come up with an alternative solution in order to avoid possible negative emotions or outcomes related to the ethical issue encountered	Bargh, 1997; Elliot, 2006
Avoidance behavior	Actions prompted by negative stimuli and reactive approaches to completing the task; mainly targeted at bypassing the need to perform a certain action	Elliot, 2006
Coping strategy	Developing or adopting cognitive or behavioral approaches to deal effectively with the ethical situation at hand	Endler & Parker, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984

Findings

The analysis of the participants' reflections on their actions during the project revealed that, overall, participants' motivation during their involvement in the photovoice project can be characterized as driven by either avoidance or approach reasoning. Based on their choice to avoid or to approach, participants developed coping strategies that helped them to respond to the ethical challenges involved and to complete the project. The findings are divided into two major parts.

First, we present the findings of the data analysis. Then, we introduce a graphical representation of approach and avoidance behavior concerning the photography decisions research participants made during their fieldwork, as well as coping strategies they developed to deal with ethical dilemmas that emerged in the process (see Figure 2).

Choosing to Avoid Photographing People

Avoidance motivation.

Participants' choices to perform or avoid certain actions were largely guided by the knowledge of ethics in visual research gained from an ethics session preceding the study. More specifically, the need of seeking informed consent provoked numerous actions that were at the core of avoidance motivation and behavior. In the ethics session, participants received small consent vouchers that could be pulled out and used whenever an opportunity for a photograph arose. Avoidance motivation was mainly related to the use of these consent vouchers and asking strangers for their signed consent to have their pictures included in the study. In most cases, it was not the size of the vouchers but the unwillingness to talk to strangers that prevented participants from using them. Some students did not take pictures specifically for the project but selected some pictures from those they had previously taken for themselves, deliberately omitting photos with people because they had no opportunity to ask for consent. Moreover, participants believed that displaying people in a picture did not necessarily contribute much to the message they intended to convey because "the topic can be expressed in another way" (Mei). Overall, the participants' motivation for avoiding using consent vouchers was conscious and driven by a variety of different aspects that can be classified in three major interrelated categories: emotional, cultural, and pragmatic aspects.

     Emotional aspects.

For some, the reluctance to using consent vouchers was related to emotional aspects. Several participants experienced a sense of discomfort in having to approach people they were unfamiliar with, particularly with what they considered a formal request to participate in a study. The discomfort related to emotional feelings such as "shyness" and the practice of talking to strangers:

> To communicate with others is ok, but to ask their permission for something is new for me. It is really uncomfortable ... For me everybody is a foreigner. Even in my own country, communicating with strangers is always a challenge in the beginning. (Chen)

Participants tried to avoid explaining the details of the project and "persuading" people to sign consent vouchers. Several participants agreed that the vouchers were small and "easy to take with them," but did not use them "because then they had to persuade the person" to be photographed (Mei). In addition, several participants believed they were already sufficiently involved by taking pictures and were annoyed with the extra step of having to ask people to sign the voucher.

     Cultural aspects.

We found a link between people's cultural habits, values, and norms and avoiding asking people to sign consent vouchers. Asian participants almost unanimously agreed on the fact that "asking a stranger to do something for them" was not common in their culture. This can be illustrated by a quotation from Bian:

> I try to avoid the strange people's faces appear in my pictures. Then I avoid having to ask them for their permission. It is kind of strange to ask unknown people to do something for me. It may be because of my Asian culture. So I tried my best to avoid that.

Bian also generalized this assertion to the whole subgroup of Asian participants: "I think that they use the same strategies as I am. They are all Asian and I believe they think the same way as I do." Emiko shared that "If you want to take a picture of your friend, it is not so difficult to ask them [for consent]," and this comment suggested that familiarity with the research subject prompted approaching behavior. The reluctance to talk to a stranger was lower in the group of African participants.

Pragmatic aspects.

Several participants linked their avoidance motivation and the choice not to use consent vouchers to the practical aspects of shooting pictures. They believed that it was easier to look for "a way out" of informed consent, because this was considered a time and energy saver. For example, Emiko stated:

> I am not the person to hesitate to do something but I am also a bit lazy, and to ask someone for a signature takes a long time. … I have to explain about my project and about a lot of things, so I don't want to do it.

Another important obstacle mentioned by participants was the language barrier. It was difficult to anticipate whether or not people were able to speak or understand English, since the study was conducted in a Dutch-speaking environment: "I think most people speak English well here. But you cannot take it for granted that everybody will be open to this. I think the language was also a bit of an issue here" (Henrik). Thus, the language aspect also played a role in the avoidance reasoning.

Avoidance behavior.

To escape potentially uncomfortable situations related to using consent vouchers, participants developed three major avoidance-oriented coping strategies: bypassing the consent form; avoiding talking to strangers; and avoiding sensitive topics.

Bypassing the consent form.

While generally described as "a good idea" (Mei), the informed consent vouchers received some criticism: "It is a little bit unpractical and it seems like a lot of effort" (Baruti). For one participant, the use of the vouchers depended on the situation: "If I walk in the city and see people I want to photograph, it is easy to do [use vouchers], but if I go hiking, I am not going to carry an extra piece of something with me" (Abri). Other participants supported this statement. While most participants perceived consent vouchers as practical and useful, the number of students who actually used these vouchers in practice was dramatically low and almost all of them stated that they were uncomfortable asking people to sign consent forms.

Another strategy used to bypass the consent form was to take pictures in public spaces and consequently avoid private spaces. There was a general perception that people would not mind to be photographed in public spaces. Baruti reflected: "It is a strange idea that someone might be concerned about being photographed in public. If I am in public, people can see me, they can recognize me." Opinions on the relevance of using consent forms in public spaces differed though,

with some participants supporting the statement that an informed consent should be asked in all circumstances, including in public places.

Avoiding talking to strangers.

Participants avoided talking to strangers by skipping the consent form for emotional and cultural reasons. This behavior was a conscious choice, a strategy developed for the needs of this project. The reasons for such a choice included the option of taking pictures without persons and the availability of alternative choices such as "shooting landscapes, or scenery, or places" (Dong). Chen further explained: "Most of the time, I did these things [taking pictures without faces] intentionally, because if I show these pictures, even without the faces, they can tell us enough … It is an easy way to conduct this research." The reluctance to communicate with strangers was more pronounced at the beginning of the project and led some participants to "cancel a lot of opportunities for pictures" (Chen), thus suggesting possible negative implications for the photovoice project.

Avoiding sensitive topics.

In their pictures, participants were careful to avoid displaying sensitive topics such as those discussed in the ethics session: embarrassing (e.g., underwear) or discomforting (e.g., dirty room) situations and culturally inappropriate (e.g., Muslim students drinking beer) or illegal (e.g., drugs) content. Also, participants believed that some public places may be embarrassing and should be avoided, such as parties. Dong explained that such pictures "may expose the background or the place where people were; and they may want to keep it private." Generally, the research participants favored a researcher attitude in which a degree of ethical judgment is used before deciding to expose sensitive pictures.

Finally, cultural and religious norms were also ingrained in the participants' perceptions of sensitive content. For example, participants perceived pictures of Belgian girls drinking in public as harmless because "they would not mind to be seen with a bottle of beer in their hand" (Abri), but it was inappropriate to some to photograph a Muslim man drinking beer.

Choosing to Approach Potential Subjects

Approach motivation.

Participants' approach motivation and behavior during the project were also largely framed by the introductory ethics session that impacted their perceptions of the project and their actions during the project. While new knowledge about the ethics involved in photographing impacted participants' avoidance behaviors, it also prompted them to seek ways to complete the project, mainly by developing and adopting proactive coping strategies. Several participants mentioned that their involvement in the photovoice project has greatly influenced their thinking around ethical issues in photographing people and its implications. Overall, approach motivation of the participants may be characterized as intrinsic (project participation was perceived as personally rewarding) or extrinsic (engaging in an activity was prompted by external stimuli, such as researchers conducting the follow-up or other participants motivating a student to collaborate).

Intrinsic aspects.

The intrinsic motivation behind proactive actions pertaining to the photovoice project was largely guided by the participants' interest in the study and in performing the tasks associated with active

project involvement. Specifically, the original motivation behind project participation (e.g., interest in the photovoice method; interest in the topic; willingness to participate in the research conducted by their friends) was the foundation for approach motivation for participants, and central to the overall project participation and to the specific actions taken by students to fulfill the aims of the study. After attending the ethics session, participants internalized new knowledge about ethical concerns in using pictures of people without their consent and applied it to their personal lives: "Sometimes we are irritated and frustrated when we are tagged in a picture [on Facebook]. So it is very important to ask for permission to have some strangers' faces in a photo" (Bian). As such, participation in the project also induced a learning curve for participants.

However, there was a differentiation between the personal and academic use of pictures, mainly because once the picture was published as a part of a scientific work it would be hard to delete it: "If I put a picture of the climbing club on the website and someone in this photo doesn't like it, they can have it removed. If we put this in academic work, the person cannot do anything about it" (Abri). Such accounts suggest that participants' intrinsic motivation was framed by the new knowledge about ethical research conduct obtained during the introductory ethics session.

Extrinsic aspects.

Extrinsic motivation behind the active participation was guided by the researchers checking the task completion and by other participants, via the exchange of ideas during the focus group meetings. It was connected to the cultural characteristics of the project setting and topic. Some participants strongly believed that taking pictures for research purposes and the ethical issues aligned with it should be evaluated in the context of "the society, the people you are surrounded with, because what is right or wrong here can be different in my country" (Baruti). Several participants agreed that being in a university town made their task easier because "people know that there are numerous academics in the city" (Dong); therefore, people might be more used to being asked to participate in research projects.

Approach behavior.

The approach behavior of participants can be best described as a coping behavior, that is, participants' adaptation to the needs and realities of the situation at hand and the skills or approaches they have developed to better manage the photovoice tasks. Notably, participants developed several coping strategies to avoid approaching people to ask for signed informed consent. However, these strategies were proactive in nature because participants actively sought ways to complete the project; therefore, they were classified as examples of approach behavior rather than an avoidance mechanism. These strategies were mainly problem-based and can be classified in three major categories: shooting landscape and scenery, not people; masking the recognizability of people; and taking pictures of self and friends.

Shooting landscapes and scenery, not people.

Several participants opted for pictures that did not include people, neither in the process of shooting nor while selecting pictures to be shared with the researchers. Most participants made a conscious choice at the point of taking pictures and intentionally pictured particular settings instead of persons. Their rationale was: "These pictures even without people can tell us enough" (Chen). Participants believed that pictures with non-recognizable people or without people expressed their ideas adequately and saved them the trouble of having to communicate with strangers.

Some photographed people; however, because an informed consent form was missing, they decided not to submit these pictures for the project. Yet, participants recognized that some of these pictures might have been good illustrations of the topic of interest:

> When I see people in the street, even if they are strangers, they usually smile when they make eye contact with me. This is one of my culture shocks. [However,] if I wanted to take a picture of that, I would have to ask them for signed consent. [So I did not]. (Emiko).

This example shows that even in cases where people were "needed" to express the idea behind the photo, participants looked for other options. Another reason for not having people in a picture was the project topic: "academic and cultural adjustment." Participants believed they could express their ideas about cultural and academic integration through images that did not include people: "I mainly took pictures of the books, the library, of the places where people typically do not appear" (Bian). For others, this preference was a personal choice. Henrik, for example, stated that he did not like taking close-up pictures of people. In his opinion, it was more interesting to visually investigate "how people relate to buildings and spaces, rather than just to focus on them."

Masking the recognizability of people.

Masking the recognizability of people was a "strategic" coping behavior that limited the possibility of having to face ethical concerns related to the pictures taken. Several participants considered strategies that masked the identity of the persons in their pictures, such as blurring their faces before sharing the pictures with the research team and shooting only parts of the body. These strategies had been picked up from the ethics session preceding the study and were applied in practice. Several participants took pictures where they deliberately cut off the heads of the persons to be able to use the picture without having to ask for consent. The rationale was: "You can still get the message of the photo if we just show the section of people's hands and feet" (Abri).

Other participants opted for photos that only showed the people's backs or only included pictures with people wearing hats or sunglasses, which decreased the chance that others would recognize them. For example, when discussing a picture of people boarding the train, Toby stated that "it was intentionally done [photographing the passengers' backs] to make sure nobody is recognizable." Another approach used by the same research participant was to crop the picture so as not to include people in it. This was applied to a picture of the bikes at the train station used to illustrate what Belgians have in common: "the picture is about the bikes, not about people; to show that the bikes are important here."

Taking pictures of self and friends.

A way to reconcile the dichotomy between avoiding asking strangers for consent and wanting to have people in the photos was to include pictures of self, friends, and family. The motivation behind this choice mainly focused on reducing stress associated with asking for informed consent. Mei explained: "In some situations we had to take pictures with people, so instead of others I photographed myself and friends. Then it is not a problem to sign the form, it is easier." Some participants were very cautious and did not include faces even if people agreed to be in the photos: "My friends accepted to take a picture with their faces in it, but just in case I did not take a picture with their faces" (Emiko). Thus, the motive behind taking pictures of self and friends was the comfort and low effort associated with asking people to sign a consent form, which

reiterated that cultural and emotional aspects related to the use of vouchers were the main reasons prompting avoidance behavior.
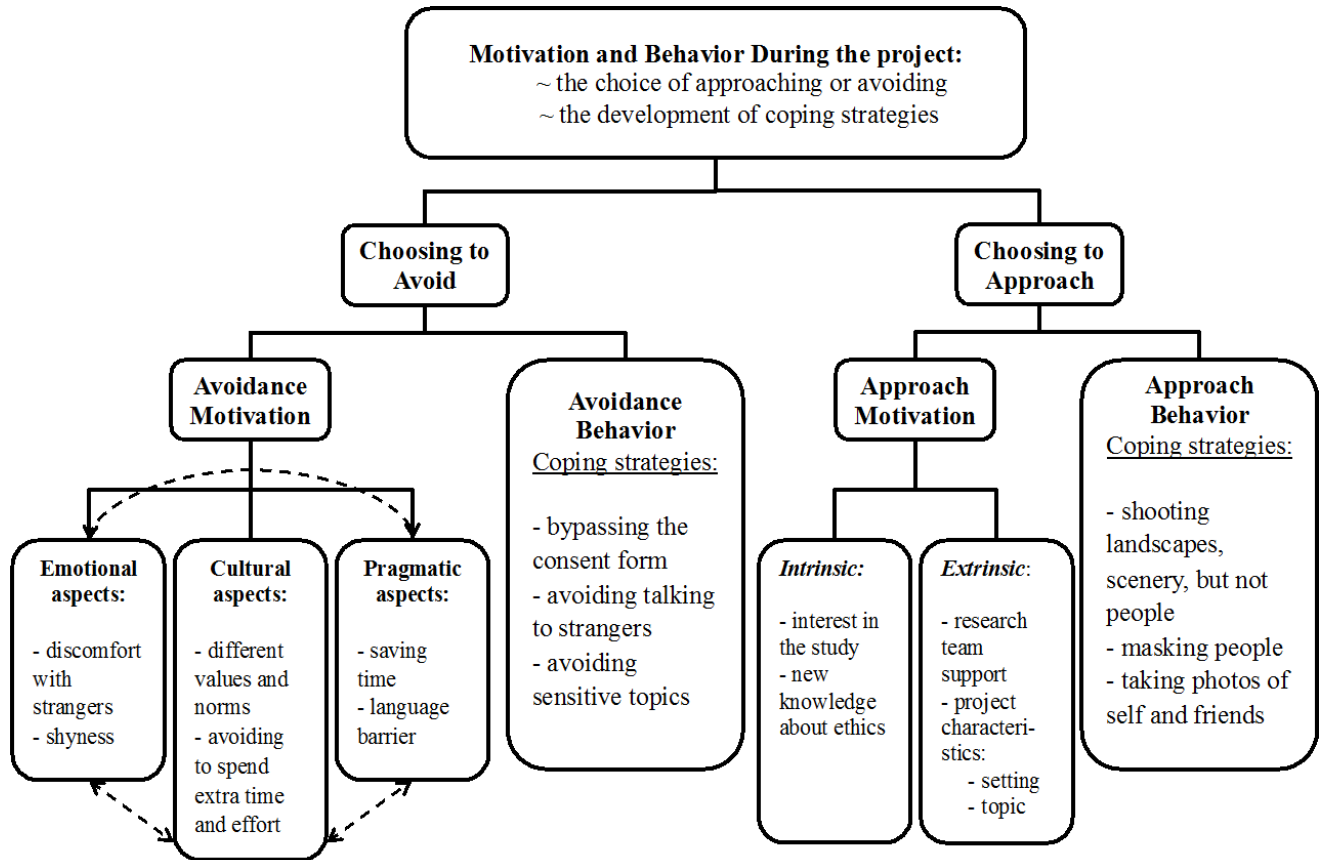
Graphical Model

Figure 2. Graphical model.

The graphical model (Figure 2) summarizes the findings of this analysis. In short, participants chose either approach motivation or avoidance motivation and, consistent with this choice, they adopted or developed approach coping strategies or avoidance coping strategies. The aspects behind avoidance motivation were interrelated and overlapping; for example, participants' cultural background (cultural aspect) contributed to their discomfort with talking to strangers (emotional aspect). Similarly, intrinsic and extrinsic aspects pertaining to approach motivation were also connected. For instance, the project setting and characteristics (extrinsic aspect) impacted the participants' interest in the study (intrinsic aspect). The avoidance behavior was generally aimed at reducing the possibility of getting into an uncomfortable situation, while approach behavior aimed at developing effective strategies to deal with the project assignments.

Participants believed that what they had learned about ethics in visual research led them into being more thoughtful and sensitive about taking pictures in general, particularly when it involved people. Exposure to ethics in photovoice research made some participants reconsider their attitude towards taking pictures in general, and made them analyze situations as ethically appropriate or inappropriate. In addition, project participation fostered participants' awareness of the personal challenges and obstacles related to the process of trying to acculturate into a new

academic culture. In particular, meetings with other participants to share their pictures promoted relationship building and peer learning and led to an increased understanding of the project, its characteristics, and ethical decisions involved in this type of research. This then induced a deeper level of reflection about their personal experiences.

Discussion

Given the evolving nature of qualitative research, it is important to examine ethical issues that arise in the process (Roth, 2005). The increasing use of visual research approaches relying on participant-generated photographs such as the photovoice research technique (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997) calls for closer examination of various ethical concerns involved in this type of research. This study aimed to contribute to the methodological literature of photovoice research by examining participants' experiences in dealing with ethical issues encountered during the fieldwork. Specifically, we analyzed participants' experiences of and perspectives about taking pictures of people for the purposes of a photovoice project.

Different Perceptions of Ethics Pertaining to Research Photographs

Even though the introductory ethics session impacted participants' beliefs about ethics in research and guided their behavior during the photovoice project, participants expressed different ideas concerning the recognizability of people, suggesting that despite the ethics session and focus group discussions, the perceived notions of ethics and of picture appropriateness still varied among participants. Taking pictures of recognizable people for the purposes of a photovoice research project raised several red flags for participants regarding the ethics ingrained in the process. First, some participants believed that the academic nature of these images implied that they would not be misused, hereby supporting the statement that integrity is inseparable from the position of the researcher. Others, however, supported the viewpoint that photographs that may reveal a person's identity without their consent should not be used. Thus, some participants viewed photos as a violation of privacy and, therefore, avoided including pictures with recognizable people. Second, several participants did not perceive shooting people in an open space as a problem, because the people displayed were generally small and hard to recognize (e.g., at a park, farmers' market, train station); others asserted that even for public spaces images displaying persons without their consent should be avoided. Finally, participants internalized the ethical principles differently. Some would not share pictures with recognizable people without their explicit consent. For others it was okay to share a picture with someone's face in it, if the focus of the picture was not on the person but on the environment. This suggests that for at least some participants the privacy of the research subjects was not their primary concern. Based on the findings from our study, we argue that these differences were closely connected to the personal characteristics (i.e., religious beliefs; academic department) and cultural background (i.e., country of origin) of research participants. Notably, Asian participants in our study perceived asking for signed consent as a violation of cultural norms. It should be further explored whether or not these differences relate to the diverse backgrounds of the participants and how they are manifested across different participant groups.

Unintended Consequences

The ethics session increased participants' reflexivity and cautiousness about potential ethical pitfalls. However, ethical concerns led to an unexpected consequence—avoiding people in pictures as a strategy to evade ethical dilemmas and forego having to ask people for informed consent. This indicates that having learned about ethical concerns inherent in photovoice research, participants mostly opted for a safer choice instead of actively trying to deal with potential ethical

consequences. Yet, such a response suggests that learning about ethics prompted an action different from what the researchers intended as well as impacted the motivation behind the actions of participants during the project.

While participants claimed to fully understand the need for and the importance of informed consent in the context of taking pictures of people, they avoided using consent vouchers. Some participants became strategic in the type of pictures taken or selected for the project. In some pictures, people were blurred before submission. Others masked faces or cropped pictures to present only parts of the body. To our understanding, the use of photo-editing software takes time and effort. Participants' willingness to engage in reshaping the pictures displaying recognizable people contradicts with some of the pragmatic arguments given by participants to legitimize the absence of consent forms, such as the time-consuming nature and extra effort in approaching people. Therefore, this finding may indicate that cultural aspects and character traits, such as shyness and cultural norms, were more important reasons behind participants' avoidance behaviors. Finally, motivation for avoidance behavior was the Dutch-speaking environment of English-speaking participants. This barrier, however, is context-specific and may not be applicable to other visual projects.

Implications and Recommendations

Ethics session.

One of the key findings of this study is the importance of the introductory ethics session informing the participants' understanding of and approaches to dealing with potential ethical issues that may arise during fieldwork in a participatory visual research project. Given that participants in such studies are co-researchers, it is important to provide ethical training prior to the data collection to equip participants with knowledge and skills necessary to complete the project. The length and content of this session depended on the participants and the characteristics of the study. For example, some participants may need additional training on how to use the equipment in addition to the integral part about the ethical decisions to be made during fieldwork.

In our study, the participants assessed the ethics session as informative, well organized, and adequate, offering ideas for improvement. Based on our understanding after having conducted this study, we estimate that there is potential in trying to improve the ethics session and change its focus from passively informing people about ethics to actively debating ethical issues with participants. A prolonged session would allow us to better identify their concerns and potential discomforts. An in-depth session may stimulate reflection on how to remove these obstacles and meet ethical challenges, before sending the participants into the field. This may increase the type of approaching behavior that we consider beneficial for photovoice projects, particularly for experiences or ideas that do not lend themselves particularly well for the use of metaphors.

Consent vouchers.

The standard ethical procedure to include pictures of recognizable people in a visual research project is to obtain a signed consent form from people appearing in these pictures. Because it falls to participants (acting as co-researchers) to obtain informed consent, it is important that they understand how such consent forms work and when and how they should be used. Based on our participants' feedback, it was a good idea to provide consent vouchers that were small and easy to carry around. Yet, participants avoided using them, suggesting that additional introductory work would be beneficial to make participants more comfortable using consent vouchers. Small group activities aimed at gaining familiarity with describing research aims to strangers and asking them

to participate in a study (by signing a consent voucher) may have made research participants more familiar and more comfortable with these processes. Future photovoice projects may benefit from a differently structured introductory ethics session that includes practical exercises in asking for informed consent. Such experiences may reduce avoidance behaviors.

Participants in our study asserted that they would most likely use the consent forms in future projects. This indicates that in subsequent thematic rounds and with an extensive exposure to fieldwork, the emotional barriers may decrease. Future research may also examine how involvement in photovoice projects impacts participants' subsequent engagement in such studies. Finally, researchers may want to examine ethical considerations pertaining to using photovoice along with other methods in future studies.

Limitations

Most interviewees offered detailed accounts of their experiences, suggesting that the use of their pictures as a stimulated recall technique was an appropriate choice. The findings may have been impacted by the fact that not all the participants of the two original studies were interviewed, mainly because by the time of the data collection for this study, some participants had left the country. We offered participants a small financial incentive (vouchers for meals in the student restaurant), which might have influenced their motivation to participate.

An independent moderator was hired to conduct the interviews, in an attempt to decrease a potential bias related to steering the participants in a particular direction. The interviews were all conducted in English. Future studies may consider working with native language speakers. Some participants had difficulties expressing their ideas in a foreign language. A potential risk associated with having to communicate in a language other than the participants' first language is a lack of depth in the answers provided. Thus, limited language capacity may have negatively impacted the research.

Notably, some participants indicated that they would be more proactive in using consent vouchers if they participated in similar projects again. There was a change over time in how participants dealt with personal feelings and emotions in the context of the project. Participants mentioned that by the end of the project, they gained more confidence in asking others for consent. In addition, some participants were willing to engage with the idea of informed consent more intensively, which seems to suggest that being able to discuss their own behavior in practice with members of the research team made them more confident. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests that longer photovoice projects increase participation quality (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that introducing participants of participatory visual research projects to research ethics has an impact on their behavior in the field. For the participants in this study, learning about potential ethical dilemmas in the ethics session prompted avoidance behaviors and the search for or adoption of appropriate coping strategies to complete the project. In summary, researchers should carefully attend to ethical considerations, both during project development (researcher level) and during project implementation (participant level). Because of the risk of damaging participants or communities (Riley & Manias, 2003), a more formal consideration of ethical issues encountered during fieldwork within participatory visual research projects is necessary to avoid potential pitfalls. Previous research suggests that one way to do this is to offer an introductory ethics session (e.g., McIntyre, 2003). While ethics sessions may

empower participants by equipping them with knowledge of research ethics, they may also have an unintentional impact on research. They may prompt avoidance behaviors and steer participants towards bypassing consent vouchers, among other behaviors. We support Jordan's (2014) claim that altering images to ensure confidentiality may misrepresent the data, thus impacting interpretation and conclusions. It follows that strict application of ethical guidelines may potentially limit our understanding of a particular phenomenon. Future studies should further examine these considerations in detail, for example by investigating the balance between following ethical principles and visually displaying interesting research ideas. On a practice level, we could start by evaluating whether or not we actually need people in pictures and whether they do add an extra layer of understanding compared to pictures that do not display a recognizable person. Many of the research participants favored pictures of public places, or succeeded in transferring their ideas into a visual metaphor related to the theme they were researching. Both strategies worked well for more abstract concepts, such as academic adjustment. Removing the "people" layer out of photos proved to be more difficult for topics related to, for example, social-cultural adjustment, because of the emphasis on social relations with others. This suggests that the relevance of introducing consent vouchers highly depends on the topic researched.

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