PARTICIPATORY VISUAL METHODOLOGIES

SOCIAL CHANGE, COMMUNITY AND POLICY

Claudia Mitchell

Naydene De Lange

Relebohile Moletsane

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In memory of Marianne Adam

22/06/1955 – 06/11/2016

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Claudia Mitchell
Naydene de Lange
Relebohile Moletsane

1

INTRODUCTION: A FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY VISUAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

There is a story behind every book and many books tell a story or a set of stories. We make every attempt in this book to tell the story of how participatory visual methodologies invoke stories which in turn can contribute, potentially, to changing stories and narratives in communities and at the policy table. Our own story – or the story behind this book – has a history that dates back to 2003 and even earlier, but 2003 is when the three of us started to work together as researchers attached to a university in South Africa. As a threesome, we more or less met over a typical academic exercise – a deadline for a grant application – except that it did not feel like a typical academic exercise. Even though none of us was really that familiar at the time with the term academic activists, we more or less saw our task of writing an academic research proposal as an act of activists. The time in South Africa was fraught given the AIDS pandemic. While it remains so 13 years later, in 2003 activists were calling for an ARV roll out, access to locally patented drugs, and, within the world of the social and educational, a recognition that schools had to be doing more. Young people were dying at an alarming rate. For example, the highest mortality rates were estimated to be among the 30–39 year age group (16.2%) during the period 2006 to 2010 (Skingsley, Takuva, Brown, Delpech, & Puren, 2014).

When we met as a trio, Relebohile had just been involved in a local conference convened by the medical faculty to address HIV and AIDS and education, except that she was the only person in Education at the conference, and worse, nobody there seemed to think there was anything unusual about the absence of educationalists at the conference. Claudia had just been involved in working with a group of young people in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, who had been active in the Treatment Action Campaign and who were now keen to do something in schools. For them it was clear that doing something about HIV and AIDS meant producing something, creating something, making something – posters, videos, poetry books. Somehow, when the three of us connected it seemed as though we already had a multi-pronged agenda. All three of us in our work as teacher educators in an education faculty were indignant about how educators and educational researchers were being left out of school-based interventions and discussions about HIV and AIDS, and at the same time we were also outraged that so much of the work related to adolescents (and especially what was even then already referred to as 'AIDS fatigue'), seemed not to involve adolescents at all. It had been just a year earlier at the International AIDS conference in Barcelona that there were banners and placards asking 'Where are the youth?' So if you take out the teachers and you take out young people in designing and implementing what needs to happen in schools, who is left? Our first project together – the proposal, participatory and visual, that we were writing when we met in March 2003 – was perhaps a leap of faith, but it was based on a fundamental recognition that people who need to be talking together were not talking to each other. The project, *Learning Together,* was a modest study. All we wanted to do was see what would happen if teachers and community health-care workers all dealing with young people would learn together. To do this we built on tools and methods such as drawing and photovoice, and even before we started working with teachers and community health workers, we learned together

ourselves by bringing together 20 or more colleagues and postgraduate students who were willing to try out drawing and photovoice as research methods. What we lacked in sophistication we made up for in enthusiasm and a good strong dose of what Low, Brushwood, Salvio, and Palacios (2012) refer to as celebration. It was hard not to be enthusiastic when people who never talk to each other – indeed had never met even professionally, though they lived down the road from each other–actually started listening and started viewing each other's work. What we found but did not know exactly what to do with, was a tremendous amount of goodwill and excitement, and although we knew it was not enough to change the world, it was enough to convince us and a few others around us that we needed to do even more of this kind of work and to broaden it into tools and methods such as participatory video, digital story-telling, and cellphilming.

Thirteen years later it would be wonderful to be able to offer the pat expression the rest is history and claim that we have somehow solved the world's problems through photovoice, drawing, participatory video, and digital story-telling, but of course we have not. What these methods have done is put into practice what visual theorists like Susan Sontag (2003) have said about the power of images to haunt us as we have seen in the types of images that are seen in humanitarian crises. Notwithstanding the controversies surrounding the use of provocative images in public settings as Batchen, Gidley, Miller, and Prosser (2012) explore in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis,* these methods have pushed to the front of the line the vast inequalities and injustices in research. In participatory visual research these inequalities are highly visible: Who owns the images? Who sees the images? What happens to the images? Who decides? As a community of scholars we have become attuned to making sure that we talk about these things – often they are the whole point of a conference presentation or article or book or series of books and journals. But more importantly, they are the starting point for this work. In this book, we seek to shift the conversation towards outcomes and the ever-present question 'What difference does this make?' What possibilities are there for dialogue – community dialogue and policy dialogue?

POLICY, POLICY, POLICY

Everyone, it seems, in the social research community, wants to influence policy. It is a legitimate aspiration given the need to challenge inequities in schools, health care, agriculture, and other community settings, and particularly in relation to such persistent concerns as sexual violence, bullying, safety and security in housing, water and sanitation, food insecurity, environmental issues, HIV and AIDS, and related health and social issues. However, as Ray Rist (2003) observes:

> There is no broad-based and sustained tradition within contemporary social science of focusing qualitative work specifically on policy issues, especially given the real time constraints that the policy process necessitates. Yet it is also clear that the opportunities are multiple for such contributions to be made. (p. 641)

Participatory visual research is an area of research where, quite clearly, there are contributions to be made in order to influence policy dialogue. The use of photography in photovoice, participatory video (including the use of mobile phone devices), digital story-telling and drawing and mapping have all been shown to be effective in engaging community participants, and especially in altering some of the typical power dynamics related to the researched/researcher, and to ensuring spaces for marginalized populations to both speak about and then speak back through interactive workshop sessions to social conditions. The products – photo exhibitions, video productions (live screenings and postings on YouTube) – are ideally suited to be seen. While there are hefty debates about process versus product, and the sometimes exaggerated claims that are often made for the overall effectiveness of such methods, especially as seen in what Low et al. (2012) refer to as celebratory writing, there are few who would argue against the power of the visual to engage multiple audiences. This book takes up the issue of ways of ensuring that visual data reaches critical audiences, providing new entry points for social change. Gubrium and Harper's (2013) book, *Participatory Visual and Digital Methods,* also calls for more explicit work in this area. One book that takes up some of the critical issues of beyond engagement is Laverack's (2013) *Health Activism: Foundations and Strategies*. However, it has a very specific activist agenda that is broader, and that has a narrower, albeit critical, policy focus in the area of health. It is clear, therefore, that much more is needed. In conference presentations, the issue of participatory research-into-policy change is one of the areas where we are bombarded with variations of the question, 'So what?'

Despite the popularity of terms such as youth-led policy-making or participant-led change, there remains a paucity of critical (and practical) work that maps out fully what this means in relation to influencing (and documenting) social change. While events and changes can happen without the intervention of researchers thinking of what happens beyond engagement, this type of change typically does not just happen as can be seen in an emerging field within participatory research that seeks to study, critique, and enhance possibilities for change. The concern is not with the generative possibilities for engaging participants in representing the issues through participatory visual methods; these possibilities are covered well in many books and articles on the use of the visual. Rather, this book seeks to offer perspectives, tools, and methods that can take us into the space beyond engagement with the overall aim of influencing community dialogue and the policy-making process. At the same time it also seeks to contribute to creating new pathways for participatory visual arts-based methods in policy-making as a field of study in itself.

COMMUNITY AND POLICY DIALOGUE

An overarching concern of this book relates to the impact of participatory visual research on community and policy dialogue. Often the most we see on impact are a few lines that appear at the end of the book, thesis, chapter, or article calling for action or suggesting

implications for policy or policy dialogue. This is changing as we see in collections such as Gubrium, Harper, and Otañez's (2015) *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action,* in which strategies for taking action are highlighted. However, it is also important to recognize that the idea of social change is multi-faceted and so are the appropriate audiences. Sometimes the audience for the visual productions, as we highlight in Chapter 3 on speaking back, are the participants themselves. At other points the audiences may be community members or various policy makers, and often a combination of both. There may be many legitimate reasons for the fact that there is less documentation on the engagement process, not the least of which is the fact that community dialogue is not typically a once off affair (and when does it begin and end?), and policy dialogue and policy-making are seldom overnight activities. As we know from the rich body of work on policy cycles (see Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992), the task of policy uptake work often extends long beyond a project and, in the case of funded research, often beyond the life of the funding. In addition, there may be many intervening circumstances such as elections, a change of government or administration, or critical events that take place in the community or country. While the focus of the work of participation using visual media is commonly on the actual production process, increasingly there is also an interest in the images themselves (e.g. photos, videos, vlogs, and cellphilms) as a way of developing an understanding of the phenomenon under study, and the influence of power relations among those involved. There is also an increased emphasis on the idea of knowledge-production. This is something we see in the body of work on youth as knowledge producers, or work with community health-care workers as cultural producers and so on. A central premise of this chapter – and indeed, of the book as a whole – is the idea that the meaningful engagement of the various social groups who participate in participatory visual research necessitates an understanding of the meaningful engagement of communities and various stakeholders as audiences in relation to this work. As such, we argue that if we are to take seriously participatory visual research and the potential of this work to influence social change, we are obliged to go full circle to study the idea of engaging audiences.

Paradoxically, much less has been written in the area of participatory visual research about engaging audiences or the impact of participatory visual work on various communities and stakeholders. It is worth noting that in an analysis of a decade of articles in *Visual Studies*, the *Journal of Visual Culture* and *Visual Communication*, relatively few articles take up the idea of audience in an explicit way although, of course, audiences are often implicit.[1] Our analysis started with a keyword search using terms such as *audience, reception, and viewers/ship*. In the *Journal of Visual Culture*, a search for the term *audience* called up 201 entries, with only one including the term in the main title of the article (Chalfen, Sherman, & Rich, 2010). The keyword *reception* called up 157 entries, but was never located within the title of the publications. Finally, the term *viewers* or *viewership* located 337 and 1 entries respectively, with both terms combined within the same article only

[1]We acknowledge the assistance of Lukas Labacher in carrying out this keyword analysis.

once (Luce, 2011). Of those that cited *viewers*, only two (Halasz, 2010; Luce, 2011) included the term in the title of the article. Together, where *audience, reception, community engagement, and viewers/ship* were referenced in the journal *Visual Studies*, a combined 837 times located within book reviews, editorials, and primary journal articles, only five entries (0.005%) included the identifying terms in the titles of the works. In a second keyword search in the *Journal of Visual Culture, audience* located 177 entries, *reception* located 88, *community* AND *engagement* found 51, and *viewers* or *viewership* located 177 entries. Surprisingly, no entries from 493 initially located within an all-fields search had these keywords in the title of the entries. Finally, in the journal *Visual Communication*, a search for *audience, reception, community* AND *engagement, and viewers/ship* located 1/156 (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015), 1/51 (Bucher & Niemann, 2012), 0/56, and 1/156 (Lick, 2015) entries published between January 2005 and December 2015.

In our analysis it appears that notions of audience, community engagement, reception, and viewership are similarly hidden from the main titles of articles that, on a deeper analysis, do sometimes present a discussion on these topics. Surprisingly, the study of online audiences in these journals does not fare much better. While online work on audiences reveals terminology that suggests a much more nuanced notion of the interplay of uses, producers, and audiences, there still remains relatively little known about online audiences. As Carpentier, Schrøder, and Hallett (2013) observe:

> … paradoxically, when user, producer and audience become more conflated, the user component dominates the chain of equivalence, and all audiences become articulated as passive participants. (As cited in de Ridder et al., 2016, p. 131)

At the same time, as Lunt and Livingstone (2013) point out, the idea of public sphere, is one that has become prominent in media studies as they found in an analysis of references to public sphere – a term which implies audience – in the journal *Media, Culture and Society*. Similarly, the idea of a public sociology located within the notion of 'Engaging Tactics' as it is termed at Goldsmith's College in the UK[2] brings with it a rich sense of audience, dialogue and engagement, and as such points to the possibilities for a stronger sense of audience in participatory visual research.

CRITICAL AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

In this section we embark upon mapping out a framework for what we term Critical Audience Engagement. In developing this we are strongly influenced by Gillian Rose's framework for a Critical Visual Methodology which, as a critical approach to interpreting visual images includes: (1) the idea of taking images seriously; (2) consideration of the

[2]https://engagingtactics.wordpress.com/

social conditions and effects of visual objects; and (3) a level of reflexivity on the part of the researcher which 'considers [their] own ways of looking at images' (Rose, 2001, p. 16). We take as an entry point the work of the French sociologist, Robert Escarpit (1958), well known for his formulation in the sociology of literature, 'Who reads what, why, how, and with what effect?' to develop a new extended question: 'Who looks at what, where, when, why, how and with what effect?' To respond to Escarpit, we have identified several bodies of literature and studies of visual practices that, while typically taken to be very separate (and that arise out of different disciplinary areas), have great potential to be complementary in contributing to a deeper understanding of the issues of engagement and impact in participatory visual studies. These include: (1) audience engagement research, as an area to which we have already alluded in reference to Rose's work, and as a research area that encompasses work across visual studies, media, and digital studies; (2) political listening as an important area of inquiry for studying policy dialogue; and (3) literature on reflexivity both in relation to researchers but also participants. Emerging from the interaction among these three elements is community engagement and dialogue which enhance opportunities for social change (see Figure 1.1).

Our work takes as a starting point the idea that the populations who typically are involved in participatory visual research occupy a marginal position and so their visual productions may also be marginalized. Darcy Alexandra (2015) in her compelling essay, *Are We Listening Yet? Participatory Knowledge-Production through Media Practices; Encounters of Political Listening*, draws on the work of well-known media theorist, Jean Burgess: 'The question that we ask about "democratic" media participation can no longer be limited to "Who gets to speak?" We must also ask "Who is heard and to what end?"' (Burgess, 2006, as cited

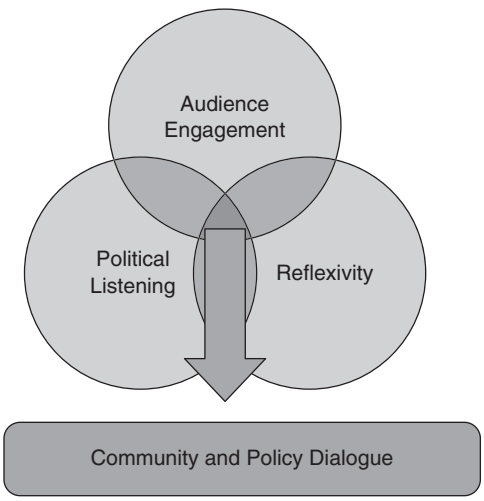

Figure 1.1 Framework for critical audience engagement and dialogue for social change

Diagram developed by Claudia Mitchell

in Alexandra, 2015, p. 43). Extensive work in the areas of childhood and youth studies, for example, draws attention to the fact that young people may not have a voice even in a project that sets out to give them voice. Researching and testing out the material and social conditions that are necessary for ensuring that community members or policy makers respond meaningfully to video productions or digital stories produced by homeless young people, young women who have been victims of gender violence, women farmers, or children in an informal settlement in Nairobi, are what make this work critical.

As a second key point, the viewers themselves for this work may also occupy varying positions that challenge conventional notions of audience. What does it mean to be a community member viewing the images produced by other community members who occupy the same status? Participatory work can both disrupt the idea of who is an artist, film maker, or photographer but also who and how audiences are meant to view the work. Participating in community exhibitions or screenings is a very context-specific social activity. This is highlighted by Mitchell's (2016) discussion of an exhibition in a community centre in the middle of an informal settlement in Nairobi, where community members arrive at the community centre but are uncertain about what they should do next. There is no obvious beginning. Should they sit down as they typically do for a community consultation and wait for events to start? But most of the benches have been removed to maximize viewing space. It is not just about how to look at the actual photos, but the idea of walking around freely in a public building and looking at things on the walls. Is it even allowed?

Closely related to the points noted above, there is still the researcher – I/we – and we might need to continue to think about the question 'Where are we in the picture?' Notwithstanding a consideration of the emerging body of work in participatory visual research on such issues as power and ownership, there is sometimes too much of researcher reflexivity and not enough of the participants' reflexivity. At the same time, this is typically not DIY work, and researchers are implicated. As Delgado (2015) reminds us in his comprehensive review of photovoice work with urban youth, we may be implicated in not doing enough or not being sufficiently strategic. As he observes, 'Having an exhibition boycotted because of its controversial content, or, even worse, simply ignored, with minimal attendance and no media coverage, can have a long lasting impact on the participants' (p. 99). Perhaps the most compelling point is one that he shares from the work of Haw (2008) and the idea that the opposite of having a voice is being silenced. Failure (on the part of researchers) to come up with a way for photos or other visual images and productions to reach appropriate audiences is part of that silencing.

Audience Research

Audience research is a legitimate area of study in Television Studies, Cultural Studies, and Communication Studies and indeed, in the context of digital and social media has become increasingly diversified and more complex. This is highlighted in several new collections