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Seeing Visuals Through a Unique Lens: A Review of Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy

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Abstract

Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy by Claudia Mitchell, Naydene De Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane (2017) offers practitioners a thorough synopsis of participatory visual methods of research and provides an abundance of useful information on how to effectively expand the field. The book provides figures, examples, and case studies to illustrate ways achieve these goals. It dissects various methods of participatory visual research, as well as how to use such methods to influence greater systems. It is a valuable guide for experienced researchers seeking to extend the influence of their participatory research in relation to social change, community impact, and policy dialogue. In this review, I will offer reflections about the material through my unique lens as both a family therapist and novice to participatory visual research.

Keywords

Participatory Visual Methodologies, Social Change, Community, Policy, Participatory Research, Claudia Mitchell, Naydene De Lange, Relebohile Moletsane, Book Review

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Seeing Visuals Through a Unique Lens: A Review of *Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy*

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Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy by Claudia Mitchell, Naydene De Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane (2017) offers practitioners a thorough synopsis of participatory visual methods of research and provides an abundance of useful information on how to effectively expand the field. The book provides figures, examples, and case studies to illustrate ways achieve these goals. It dissects various methods of participatory visual research, as well as how to use such methods to influence greater systems. It is a valuable guide for experienced researchers seeking to extend the influence of their participatory research in relation to social change, community impact, and policy dialogue. In this review, I will offer reflections about the material through my unique lens as both a family therapist and novice to participatory visual research. **Keywords:** *Participatory Visual Methodologies, Social Change, Community, Policy, Participatory Research, Claudia Mitchell, Naydene De Lange, Relebohile Moletsane, Book Review*

My Perspective as the Reviewer

I am currently pursuing a Ph.D. in family therapy. My background in research includes a graduate course in research methods, but before reading this book, I had limited formal training in the field of participatory visual research and its possible uses. I took one course in Media Software Tools, which exposed me to various tools for creating, editing, and presenting visual information. The field of family therapy uses various types of research to influence social change, engage the community, and contribute to policy dialogue. Thus, I felt this book could serve as a valuable resource as I explore different methodologies for the research design of my dissertation. I chose to review this book because I felt my exposure to the systemic ideas of family therapy could provide a valuable lens from which to explore the extent to which participatory visual methodologies can be implemented in social science research.

Main Overview

Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy by Claudia Mitchell, Naydene De Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane (2017) provides an in-depth look into the world of participatory visual research, carefully outlining how various methodologies can be used as tools to assist in successfully implementing social change. This book was created by the research trio of Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane. They begin the book with a brief account of the circumstances that brought them together and led into the ideas presented in the book. I was impressed with their candidness, as well as the way they were able to evolve from meeting by chance while doing grant work together in South Africa, to collaborating for over a decade on various projects, including this one. In fact, they frequently use work they did together as examples in this book.

The authors designed their book to consist of eight chapters full of unique figures, all of which are clearly listed in numerical order at the beginning of the work for the reader's convenience. The figures are well placed, performing tasks such as providing insight into the

particular mode of representation being used or displaying a chart to visually expand upon a given topic. Each chapter details a different aspect of participatory visual research, with the concepts progressing in a linear fashion. The main concepts are presented in the introduction, followed by chapters detailing project design, common methods of presentation, the role of the researcher, the impact on the participants, and the role of change. Despite this sequential arrangement, I found the content of the chapters to be intertwined throughout the book in a very systemic fashion. The ideas of social change, community, and policy are regularly referenced in a way that continually builds upon the overall theme of how participatory action research can benefit researchers, participants, policy holders, and the overall community in a positive way.

Several specific participatory visual methodologies are described in the introduction, yet participatory visual research is never overtly defined. I found this to be a hindrance when trying to get a global understanding of the material. *Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy* is not an introductory work and I would not recommend it to anyone seeking to begin their journey into this area of research. The back of the book states it is designed for postgraduate researchers and that description is consistent with my experience as a reader. The authors present the material in a sophisticated way, as if they are talking to peers in the field.

The introduction describes the goal of the book as being 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” (p. 2). Through the use of various case studies and the occasional descriptive snippet, the authors implement the idea of storytelling; however, the overall tone of the book is more scholarly than narrative. Even as a doctoral student in a research-oriented institution, I found many of the concepts were unfamiliar and required further investigation to understand.

The book is better described as a tool designed for those already familiar with these ideas who are seeking to expound upon their work. According to that purpose, the book is quite effective. It provides unique insights from the authors’ significant field experience that can help other researchers have more effective and impactful results, especially in the areas of policy dialogue and participant-led research.

The focus of this book that most interested me is highlighted in the subtitle: social change. As a family therapist, change is one of the most important features of my field. As a believer in social constructivism, the influence of the social environment shapes the way I see the world and understand the things in it. Thus, this component of the book was a large reason of why I decided to review it, despite the fact that I was mostly unfamiliar with participatory visual research. I wanted to investigate how I could use participatory visual research in my field, since Mitchell, Naydene, and Moletsane state it is intended to be a resource for researchers to use across disciplines.

There were a few participatory visual methodologies mentioned by the authors that I feel could be used in a way family therapists can appreciate. For instance, the ideas of reflexivity and the co-production of research call for collaboration between participant, researcher, and audience. This means they could be used in virtually all methodologies, not only visual participatory methods, to increase the chances for better informed and more meaningful work. *Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change, Community, and Policy* provides photography and drawing/mapping as examples of methods that have been used effectively by the authors. I feel that each of these has the potential to be used in social science disciplines in a way that benefits the participant, researcher, community, and society. They are all examples of flexible techniques that can be personalized by the client, giving them the means by which to freely tell their story. This may be useful because, particularly in family therapy, it is important for the client to have space to be autonomous.

In contrast, I found some of the methodologies presented in this book to be unlikely to be implemented in certain disciplines. Participatory video, such as digital story-telling and cellfilms, would be difficult to use in many social science disciplines due to the strict adherence for confidentiality. While I do not think it impossible, it would require elaborate training and attention to detail. Family therapy is an intimate field, especially with the most personal details of one's life being displayed. Thus, not all are willing to consent for such information to be publicly accessible. Though in my own field these types of participatory visual methodologies may not be used in the way they were outlined in the book, many of these things could be used efficiently in other areas.

Final Considerations

This book does an excellent job of completing the task it sets out to do, which is to further develop knowledge of participatory visual methodologies and provide valuable information to assist established researchers in having more effective research experiences. Even despite my unfamiliarity, I found various aspects of the book to have the potential to be beneficial in my own research in the field of family therapy. It made good on its claim to be useful across different disciplines. This book also contains complex and elaborate ideas that pertain specifically to participatory visual research and many of its methodologies. It is my overall opinion that if you are more experienced in these approaches and already possess a general knowledge of the field, you may find this book quite helpful; however, if you do not, you may find it more effective to read something more foundational as you begin to investigate this area of research.

References

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Authors Note

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