10-14-2021

Virtual Photovoice: Methodological Lessons and Cautions

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Recommended APA Citation

Call-Cummings, M., & Hauber-Özer, M. (2021). Virtual Photovoice: Methodological Lessons and Cautions. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(10), 3214-3233. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4971>

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Abstract

Photovoice is a type of participatory inquiry, which is a methodological and onto-epistemological stance that seeks to emancipate marginalized individuals, confront inequity, and work for social transformation. Photovoice incorporates Paulo Freire's problem-posing education, documentary photography techniques, and feminist thought as an approach for community members to identify shared concerns and construct collective knowledge. It also seeks to challenge unequal power relations by disrupting hegemonic structures in the production of knowledge and policy, as photographs and accompanying descriptions can communicate powerfully about community needs and demands for change. University-based researchers or practitioners facilitate this communication by bringing community perspectives to the attention of government officials and others in positions of power. In this paper, we describe how we adapted this approach for virtual use during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We offer examples of two projects that engaged photovoice in virtual spaces: *Courageous Conversations*, a youth participatory action research project which Meagan conducts with youth in the United States, and Melissa's dissertation, conducted with Syrian students who are refugees enrolled in higher education in Turkey. Through these examples we draw out methodological lessons learned as well as challenges of conducting photovoice in virtual spaces. We conclude that whether researchers and practitioners use photovoice as a method in virtual or face-to-face settings, we must remember the emancipatory goals of participatory inquiry, always relying upon and anchoring our methodological decisions in the ontologies and epistemologies of genuine participation that undergird photovoice.

Keywords

photovoice, participatory research, epistemology, participation, COVID-19, youth, Syria, refugees, Turkey

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the knowledge and expertise of the youth and others who contributed to the research highlighted in this article.

Virtual Photovoice: Methodological Lessons and Cautions

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Photovoice is a type of participatory inquiry, which is a methodological and onto-epistemological stance that seeks to emancipate marginalized individuals, confront inequity, and work for social transformation. Photovoice incorporates Paulo Freire's problem-posing education, documentary photography techniques, and feminist thought as an approach for community members to identify shared concerns and construct collective knowledge. It also seeks to challenge unequal power relations by disrupting hegemonic structures in the production of knowledge and policy, as photographs and accompanying descriptions can communicate powerfully about community needs and demands for change. University-based researchers or practitioners facilitate this communication by bringing community perspectives to the attention of government officials and others in positions of power. In this paper, we describe how we adapted this approach for virtual use during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We offer examples of two projects that engaged photovoice in virtual spaces: *Courageous Conversations*, a youth participatory action research project which Meagan conducts with youth in the United States, and Melissa's dissertation, conducted with Syrian students who are refugees enrolled in higher education in Turkey. Through these examples we draw out methodological lessons learned as well as challenges of conducting photovoice in virtual spaces. We conclude that whether researchers and practitioners use photovoice as a method in virtual or face-to-face settings, we must remember the emancipatory goals of participatory inquiry, always relying upon and anchoring our methodological decisions in the ontologies and epistemologies of genuine participation that undergird photovoice.

Keywords: photovoice, participatory research, epistemology, participation, COVID-19, youth, Syria, refugees, Turkey

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 restrictions were reshaping reality across much of the world. Businesses, schools, and workplaces closed and sent people home, with many wondering how long the pandemic would last. As messages of social distancing appeared on television advertisements, at bus stops, and in email inboxes, the authors of this manuscript joined the millions across the globe who felt increasingly isolated, separated from loved ones as well as everyday human connection. As we reached out to colleagues, we learned many researchers felt similarly. Not only had we been shut off from our children's schools and school communities, our own universities, and other social outlets, but we were also required to cease any research that involved interaction with people. As participatory researchers, this was especially difficult. Our research was anchored in often intimate dialogue with and close connection to individuals – often individuals who did not have easy access to computers or

internet that supported long conversations that now seemed necessary to continue any research at all.

In this context, we, along with colleagues affiliated with the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), decided to create an opportunity for researchers and practitioners who were feeling similarly isolated to share with each other how they were experiencing the crisis, what it looked and felt like to them, in an effort to build a sense of social solidarity and push against the narratives of separation and distancing that were quickly taking on politicized tones (Call-Cummings, Hauber-Ozer, Rowell et al., 2019). Rather than a research project per se, the Social Solidarity Project (SSP) became an outlet, a gathering place, and a space of comfort and learning as people from Canada, Colombia, England, Germany, Indonesia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and the United States gathered virtually to send multilingual messages of support and love as well as new understandings around relationships, freedom, death and grief, kindness, unity, suffering, independence, and systemic change.

Since that time, we have facilitated two other virtual photovoice projects during COVID: *Seen But Not Heard* and *Büyük Hayaller [Big Dreams]*. The purpose of this manuscript is to share the methodological lessons we have learned, including insights into the possibilities virtual connection offers as well as the limitations of inquiry at a distance. We begin by briefly situating our learning in scholarship around photovoice, its anchoring in participatory research, its underlying ontology and epistemology, and its documented affordances and constraints. We then turn to two examples of virtual photovoice projects, one ongoing project conducted with diverse youth attending high school in the United States and another conducted with Syrian refugees living and attending university in Turkey. Our discussion revolves around the possibilities we see in conducting photovoice virtually as well as its limitations. Finally, we offer several concrete recommendations to researchers and practitioners.

Literature Review

Photovoice is a type of participatory inquiry, a methodological and onto-epistemological stance that seeks to emancipate marginalized individuals, confront inequity, and work for social transformation (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Fine & Torre, 2006). It is, simply put, research-activism (Ponic et al., 2010). Rather than objects of research, community members are co-researchers and experts on the issue of concern by function of their lived experience (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991) who ideally take part in research design, data collection, and analysis (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). This requires trust, power-sharing, and critical reflection throughout the process.

Photovoice incorporates Paulo Freire's (1970) problem-posing education, documentary photography techniques, and feminist thought as an approach for community members to identify shared concerns and construct collective knowledge through critical dialogue (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). As such, the photovoice approach is deeply rooted in participatory epistemology, positioning community members "as authorities on their own lives" (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 174) and researchers as facilitators. It also seeks to challenge unequal power relations by disrupting hegemonic structures in the production of knowledge and policy, as photographs and accompanying descriptions can communicate powerfully about community assets and concerns as well as demands for change (Greene et al., 2013; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). University-based researchers or practitioners facilitate this communication by bringing community perspectives to the attention of government officials and others in positions of power (Wang & Burris, 1994).

This process is often described as “empowering” in that it offers “a concrete way for people to communicate their vision and their voice in order to inform policy” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 173; see also Budig et al., 2018; Chase, 2017; Greene et al., 2013; Sutherland & Cheng, 2009). Wright et al. (2016) even describe it as a culturally appropriate method of data collection for Indigenous peoples in Canada. However, as we have found in our own use of the method, it requires careful consideration of ethical implications, especially with vulnerable populations like immigrants and refugees (Hauber-Özer & Call-Cummings, 2020) and within hierarchical institutions like schools (Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, Byers et al., 2019; Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, & Ross, 2020). Living out the participatory principles of shared decision-making and ownership with youth co-researchers and/or those from marginalized groups requires relationships of trust and ongoing negotiation of roles considering structural and institutional inequities as well as power dynamics within the research group (Call-Cummings et al., 2019a, 2020b). Visual methods like photovoice, moreover, carry additional risks of harm, such as exposing participants’ identities or evoking distressing memories (Hauber-Özer & Call-Cummings, 2020; Teti, 2019).

The Photovoice Process

Initially called photo novella, photovoice was developed in the early 1990s by Caroline Wang as part of a larger study to document the perspectives and needs of rural Chinese women regarding health to both increase community knowledge and inform health policy decisions (Wang & Burris, 1994). It has grown in popularity among participatory researchers and practitioners in various disciplines, including health (e.g., Budig et al., 2018), education (e.g., Greene et al., 2013; Quigley et al., 2014; Sahay et al., 2016), social work (e.g., Jarldorn & ‘Deer’, 2017; Ruff, 2019), and psychology (e.g., Rania et al., 2015). Typically, the photovoice process consists of several stages: collaboratively identifying a topic, taking, and selecting photographs, reflecting on, and discussing the meanings of photographs through a group discussion or photo-elicitation interview, and writing an accompanying narrative (Wang & Burris, 1997, Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

The resulting products are often shared with stakeholders to represent community members’ interests and to influence decision making that affects the community. For example, Jarldorn partnered with ex-prisoners in Australia to document their experiences, co-authoring a powerful paper (Jarldorn & ‘Deer’, 2017) with a co-researcher who vividly describes the dehumanizing failures of the criminal justice system through photographs, narrative, and poetry. Jarldorn describes acting with these findings through a meeting with the Minister for Correctional Affairs and community functions, conferences, and her work teaching future social workers.

Possibilities of Virtual Photovoice

Photovoice has been used with stakeholders ranging in age, occupation, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and more in countries and communities around the world to represent those stakeholders’ interests, needs, and assets and to catalyze change. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need to think expansively on the possibilities of research conducted in virtual settings, and photovoice lends itself to virtual interaction because of its emphasis on inclusive participation in the process. In this paper, we detail how we modified this approach for virtual use during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the methodological lessons we learned as we conducted virtual photovoice.

While virtual photovoice is a new use with limited representation in the literature, we have looked to a few published examples of a virtual adaptation of the method. For example,

Hiscock (2020) describes using an online version of photovoice to investigate international master's students' experiences using a virtual learning platform, with the goal of making course design more inclusive and participatory. Hiscock instructed 25 participants to each create a short screen recording of their use of the platform, which was anonymized and combined into one recording (now viewable on YouTube).

Ahmet Tanhan has adapted photovoice to online use for several studies in the areas of mental health and wellbeing. Tanhan and Strack (2020) employed online photovoice (OPV) to examine the biopsychosocial spiritual strength and concerns of Muslims affiliated with colleges in the southeastern United States to improve their wellbeing during a period of rising discrimination. Using a web-based survey disseminated through social media accounts of the inter-university Muslim Student Association, participants were provided with instructions for the project, links to online resources to learn about photovoice, and instructions for borrowing devices and submitting photographs with accompanying captions in any language describing a strength or concern related to their college experience. The study findings, including one or more submissions from 131 participants, were shared at a photovoice exhibit and dinner for participants, allies, and community leaders. The authors assert that this adaptation of photovoice was beneficial for expanding participation and protecting confidentiality, especially during a time of increased surveillance and hostility toward Muslims in the U.S.

More recently, Tanhan (2020) translated his version of virtual photovoice to the Turkish context to investigate similar issues among 148 Turkish college students during COVID-19. Participants were asked to share one photograph representing a supportive factor and one representing a barrier during the pandemic. To include students without access to cameras, Tanhan allowed participants to submit stock images from the internet. An additional study (Doyumğaç et al., 2020) uses this approach to understand students' and faculty members' experiences of supports and barriers during distance education due to COVID-19. The authors developed an online form that included a consent form and sociodemographic questions as well as a video, an audio recording, and a written document to introduce the process. Although perhaps less interactive than the original method, we acknowledge that this virtual version of photovoice may be more cost- and time-efficient, could facilitate a broader reach, and is clearly useful for emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face meetings are difficult or impossible (Doyumğaç et al., 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020).

Two Cases of Virtual Photovoice

In this section, we offer two examples of photovoice projects adapted for virtual use, including several participant submissions – photographs and accompanying text – to illustrate resulting data and themes and to spark readers' imagination about potential uses of the method. Then, we reflect on the methodological lessons we have learned in the process. These projects were both conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and while we have learned much about doing participatory research during a crisis, we also have learned methodological lessons that extend beyond that context. These lessons are gleaned from reflective discussions we have had with each other and our students as we have explicitly and intentionally grappled with how, why, or if to conduct research – particularly participatory research – in virtual contexts.

Case 1: Courageous Conversations

Context and Goals

Courageous Conversations is an ongoing critical youth participatory action research (YPAR) project that began with a conversation between Meagan and the principal of a large,

public magnet high school, Forest Park High School¹ (FPHS), Mr. Sandman. Compared to many suburban high schools, FPHS is atypical in that it is diverse along racial/ethnic lines as well as socioeconomic ones. About 14% of FPHS students are listed as “Asian,” 34% “Hispanic,” 17% “Black,” 30% “White,” and 5% “Two or more races” and about a third of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Public School Review, 2020).

As a new faculty member at a university near FPHS, Meagan had reached out to Mr. Sandman during the summer of 2017 to set a meeting to discuss the possibility of partnering on a YPAR project. As they sat together and discussed what Mr. Sandman and the school would benefit from, Mr. Sandman suggested they consider a project that would explore ways in which school administrators and teachers could create a stronger sense of community and social cohesion at the school. As he talked, it became clear to Meagan that Mr. Sandman’s interests were around questions of racial equity. Over the course of the 2017-2018 academic year, and after securing Institutional Review Board approvals, Meagan worked with ten students and two teachers to create a research collective that would collect and analyze data related to this topic. After a year of research, they presented their findings and recommendations to Mr. Sandman. These recommendations included suggestions to get students out of their comfort zones in terms of the groups they most often associated with by offering a range of informal and more formal opportunities to get to know different people. We suggested playing various games in the cafeteria during lunchtimes, incentivizing attendance at after-school events, and making school spirit days more inclusive of the various cultures represented within the student body.

However, after their presentation, as they debriefed how it went, one student, Zoe, said, “I don’t think we’re asking the right questions.” Zoe meant that although our research had been rigorous (student surveys and questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups), our findings revolved around what the principal wanted to hear, not what students wanted to say. This observation resonated with all of us, and the next year we moved to a more arts-based approach to research, using methods like *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979), spoken word poetry (Call-Cummings et al., 2020a; Keith & Endsley, 2020), creative writing (Call-Cummings et al., 2021), and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) to help students have their voices heard.

As *Courageous Conversations* has continued since that time, we have used photovoice repeatedly to help students express themselves in a way that feels less intimidating than, for example, a formal survey, interview, or focus group. Having been trained in the Wang and Burris (1997) approach to photovoice, Meagan introduced it to the *Courageous Conversations* collective as one possibility for expressing themselves. Working collaboratively, the collective has since adapted the process in various ways to address the needs of those participating. Each academic year has brought a new set of school-based researchers to our research collective, and each year those co-researchers have chosen a new theme around which to create a photovoice project. In 2020-2021, we chose the theme, “seen but not heard.”

This year started out unlike any other any of us had ever experienced: All classes were completely virtual (aside from a few specialized classes for select students). As the semester got underway, the school district sent emails to students and parents with a directive that students were required to have their microphones turned off (to not disturb other learners or the teacher) and their video cameras turned on (to allow active participation and ensure attendance). While seemingly innocuous, the requirements felt like a double marginalization to many; they were seen but not heard. Teachers could see every move they made, their houses, and their siblings. They could see the belongings they did or did not have. They could potentially judge their lifestyles or ways in which they were disciplined or treated by others within view. They had no control over what others saw or did not see. It was a new form of

¹ All names except those of the authors are pseudonyms.

surveillance and voyeurism. And they were not allowed to speak up or back. They sat, watched, in silence. Or that was the intent.

Participants and Procedures

Over the 2020-2021 school year, the *Courageous Conversations* research collective asked students at FCPS to submit photographs, drawings, and narratives to speak back to this mandate. The lead co-researchers (Meagan, one teacher co-researcher, and one student co-researcher) provided specific instructions, sending a school-wide email asking students to submit original pictures or artwork and short captions that represented how they might feel “Seen but not heard” in the context of virtual schooling. Students submitted their pictures and words to the school’s distance learning platform, which was hosted by the teacher co-researcher, who then made the submissions visible. If participating students felt uncomfortable submitting directly to the school’s learning platform, they were invited to submit anonymously through the *Courageous Conversations* Instagram account or to one of the student co-researchers’ email accounts. After receiving submissions, student co-researchers posted contributions anonymously to the distance learning platform to build an archive of submissions. As these became visible, anyone at the school who requested access from the teacher co-researcher host could view the submissions and respond to them.

Pictures

At the time of writing this article, students were continuing to send submissions, albeit slowly. Creating this online photovoice gallery and sharing the gallery at recent virtual gatherings has allowed the student contributors to express how they feel about not only this most recent attempt at school-sponsored surveillance but also past and ongoing practices of marginalization and silencing (Call-Cummings et al., 2021).

Figure 1 is a drawing created by a member of the Seen but Not Heard group that shows her resistance of school silencing practices. She describes “everyday moments” like the times she is muted by teachers as microaggressions that “cloud” her mind. Instead of letting these moments define her, she illustrates her resistance, inspired by the images and writings of activists and scholars that surround her:

Figure 1
Everyday Moments

This piece is about Racial Injustice and how it affects the surroundings of certain individuals, specifically minorities and the youth. I am a minority and a teenager so I wanted to do this piece sharing how everyday moments can cloud your mind with certain cases and situations. Hence, the portraits of Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, George Floyd and so on in the background. I also decided to include some literature that not only touch on the issue of Racial Injustice but also educates on it as well.

Figure 2 includes a caption placed on top of the image submitted, drawing attention to the words: *UNLESS* someone like me cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." The Dr. Seuss quote underscores the need for people like Ashleigh, pictured here, to stand up against school-sponsored surveillance and silencing.

Figure 2

Unless

Figure 3 also sends a message within the picture: "Let my silence speak volumes."

Figure 3

Let My Silence Speak Volumes

Figure 4 suggests that even in the hallways of school – when the students were physically in the building – they were alone, isolated. The person who submitted this picture suggests that although the ways in which students communicate and connect with teachers and their peers have changed during the pandemic, their experiences of silencing are the same:

Figure 4

Alone

Figure 5, another drawing, was created by a student who suggests through her piece that sometimes she is made to feel small, insignificant, expendable, like an ant.

Figure 5

You See Me

The caption reads: “You see me... you see my hunger and my want for food, but you don’t ask me why. Yet you silence me with death.”

Finally, Figure 6 is clear: “I want to be Heard,” is the only message:

Figure 6

I Want to be Heard

These pictures and their captions clearly articulate what a survey could never communicate: students’ desires to be heard and resistance to school-sponsored surveillance that silences them.

Reflections

While the photovoice process and products were powerful for the *Courageous Conversations* collective, we have since reflected on Meagan’s experiences conducting photovoice virtually and aim to pass on several methodological lessons we have learned here. The first lesson relates to issues of access. Over the four years we conducted photovoice projects with the *Courageous Conversations* research collective we had had difficulty gathering a wide swath of students to participate in projects because everyone was always so busy – with other clubs, with homework, and with family responsibilities – and because the resources were not available to allow students to stay after school to participate. The school was only able to have buses stay late two days per week, so that limited the club’s ability to meet often. When we did meet, many students could not stay because they could not find a ride home. Conducting the project virtually increased access because students could connect from their homes. They could watch younger siblings while participating or could log on for part of the meeting and then log off when they had other meetings, needed to do homework, or had another commitment. This led to broader participation than what we had seen in previous attempts to conduct arts-based research at FCPS.

At the same time, we experienced a tension related to access. While we may have seen increased access to participate in the photovoice project, students may not have chosen to join the project because it was yet another virtual meeting. Several students who participated guessed that more people did not join because it was so hard to be on the computer all day. They suggested that students probably wanted to get off their screens after school and, even though the project was meaningful, they were just exhausted from being on screen all day. In

addition, during previous years of the project, we often saw students join research activities after they walked by the classroom and saw or heard what we were doing. They would lean in and ask someone in the room, “What’s this?” or “What’s going on?” When we would respond that we are a student group committed to creating spaces for students’ voices to be heard on issues that are important to them, students would often stay and join. This was impossible in the context of a virtual project. If students did not know about the meeting ahead of time, they would not join.

Our reflections also led us to better understand the importance of dialogue in the photovoice process. In the *Courageous Conversations* virtual photovoice project, we experienced both benefits and drawbacks related to dialogue. We saw that the openness with which we engaged in dialogue increased in the virtual setting compared with our previous two experiences conducting photovoice face to face. For example, during *Seen But Not Heard*, our group both talked and wrote in depth about our motivations for conducting the photovoice project. While we cannot say for sure why this happened, we could posit that it was because student participants felt more comfortable expressing themselves in the safety of their own homes, behind the protection of screens. Yet, while we engaged in open dialogue about why we wanted to do the project, we had difficulty gathering meaningful responses to the individual photovoice contributions in a virtual space. We used social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram to ask FCPS community members to engage with the project with very few responses. The responses we did receive were typically a thumbs up “like” without any accompanying textual dialogue. These quick indicators, while somewhat helpful to know that there were eyes on the contributions, were less meaningful than the dialogue we had hoped for.

Finally, we reflected on how individual contributions and findings are disseminated in photovoice projects. For *Courageous Conversations*, dissemination was difficult. While our core group of co-researchers worked hard to share our project through various social media outlets as well as through formal school channels, we were unable to get a feel for how the project was taken up by those it reached. We could access numerical indicators related to how many social media accounts our outgoing messages may have reached, but without responses, the effectiveness of the dissemination was unclear. At the time we write this manuscript, we continue to work as a collective to disseminate the contributions and our findings broadly.

Case 2: *Büyük Hayaller* [Big Dreams]

Context and Goals

As a language and literacy educator and doctoral candidate who had worked with adult refugee, immigrant, and international students in the United States for many years before moving to Turkey for her partner’s job in 2018, Melissa was very strategic about her dissertation focus. To speak back to rising hostility toward Syrian refugees in Turkey and to broader deficit discourses about migration, she employed advocacy ethnography (Smyth & McInerney, 2013) infused with participatory elements to document the experiences of Syrian youth accessing higher education during forced displacement. The goal of the photovoice stage of the project, which Melissa named *Büyük Hayaller* [Big Dreams], was to produce multimodal evidence of participants’ experiences and strategies for achieving their dreams despite structural, linguistic, and social barriers.

Melissa intended to gather a collective of Syrian student co-researchers at the university where her husband teaches to co-lead the data collection process; however, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down university campuses throughout Turkey – and her research plan – just as she was about to start recruiting. Students were sent home, dorms became quarantine facilities, and classes were moved to remote delivery. For would-be co-researchers, “home” often meant

crowded apartments shared with extended family members in low-income urban districts or refugee settlements along the Syrian border. Access to stable university Wi-Fi, computer labs, and quiet study spaces was abruptly cut off, and feelings of discouragement and isolation quickly set in. Not allowing the pandemic to completely derail her graduation timeline, which was important for her own integration into Turkish society as well as for her efforts to advocate for a marginalized group, Melissa moved to entirely virtual data collection. Considering the new demands on co-researchers' psychosocial wellbeing and internet access, and in consultation with her key informant, Samar, a Syrian student she had an existing relationship with, she decided on more traditional data collection consisting of a questionnaire and in-depth, semi-structured interviews followed by photovoice workshops. She also broadened the scope beyond one campus to any university in Turkey. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval and recruiting through her networks and Samar's in the spring of 2020, Melissa received 42 completed questionnaires from Syrian young adults studying in various parts of Turkey, 11 of whom agreed to discuss their experiences more extensively in individual interviews.

Participants and Procedures

In the summer, interview participants were invited to join one-time, virtual photovoice workshops based on Wang and Burris' (1997) approach via Zoom to share, discuss, and write descriptions of photographs representing university life in Turkey. Two participants (Samar and Maqsood) joined the first workshop and three (Sophia, Nasir, and Steve) participated in the second, each set for a Saturday afternoon. She sent out a flyer (Figure 7) in English and Arabic by email and WhatsApp containing instructions and a link to a registration and consent form.

Figure 7
Photovoice Invitation

Cognizant of participants' time and the burden on their internet connections – in most cases, mobile phone data on shaky networks – Melissa limited each workshop to about one hour. This worked out well given the small groups present; each participant had a chance to share at least one photograph (through the Zoom chat function or, if they had difficulty, by WhatsApp to Melissa) and discuss its meaning using the following prompts²:

1. I want to share this photo because...
2. What is important for people to understand about this photo?
3. What does this photo tell others about me or my community?

They then took 10-15 minutes to draft the text in their preferred language(s) in a Google document and then share with the other participant(s). Leyla, Aynur, and Azzam were not available during the scheduled workshops, but each submitted several photographs and captions by WhatsApp.

Pictures

Participants' submissions provided vivid insights into their experiences as students in Turkey, their resilience and creativity, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Samar's photograph (Figure 9) and description depicts her flexible and adaptable approach to life, necessitated by displacement and limited opportunities in Turkey:

I took this photo from my university in Turkey. It represents my way of life. If I lost my way, or see a lot of difficulties which I can't deal with it, then I try to choose another way, there are many directions and methods in the life that we can choose it and achieve what we want. We just need to look around us.

Figure 9

My Way of Life

Nasir, a self-described artist who had experienced overt discrimination from professors and community members during his time in Turkey, submitted several evocative pieces, including

² Adapted from Wang and Redwood Jones' (2001) SHOWeD photo-elicitation questions.

a photograph of small flowers growing between stones (Figure 10). His description uses these flowers as a metaphor for the Syrian people:

This flower opened to live on the simplest of possibilities... this raises hope for myself, after the years of war and devastation that Syria has lived through. The difficulties that we are living in will disappear with the days to become memories and lessons so that we can learn from them steadfastness, patience, endurance, and faith. I will be like this flower, carrying my knowledge with me to build my country and serve humanity without discrimination.

Figure 10
A Flower in the Stone

Leyla and Aynur's submissions both communicated messages of encouragement during difficult times. Leyla's photograph of journal pages covered in dark scribbles (Figure 11) was accompanied by Arabic and Turkish versions of the text (translated to English by Melissa): "You can take breaks but never give up. Be brave... what you call courage is not being unafraid but taking a step when you're afraid."

Figure 11
Everything Starts with a Step

One of Aynur's submissions, originally shared on her Instagram, shows a desk covered in colored papers full of notes, formulas, and reminders and featuring a heavy chemistry textbook in the middle. The caption reads: "You don't get in life what you want!! You get what you fight for! 🤝🤝"

Figure 12
What You Fight For

Similarly, one of Azzam's submissions, a photo of an olive grove spotted with colorful wildflowers behind out-of-focus barbed wire, instructs viewers to look for the positives in difficult circumstances: "If you don't get caught up on the barriers, the good sides of the barriers will break through."

Figure 13
Barriers

These examples demonstrate the potential of a virtual photovoice approach to document and speak back to experiences of marginalization and displacement in powerful ways.

Reflections

While the photovoice process and products were both powerful for Melissa and her participants, Melissa similarly felt tensions related to access in her project. While the virtual format allowed her to include participants living all over Turkey who suddenly had more flexible schedules to join research activities, there were distinct challenges. Participants mentioned feeling bored, isolated, and stressed due to the rapid shift from independent university life to studying by themselves at home during curfews and weekend lockdowns. The photovoice workshops may have offered a brief respite from this doldrum, but several participants could not join in because they were working – outside the home, likely in unsafe health conditions – or had other responsibilities. Although offering an asynchronous option to submit by WhatsApp or email helped in this regard, access to technology – the university's Wi-Fi and computer labs which they could have used on campus – was typically limited to participants' smartphones and mobile data, as computers and tablets are exorbitantly expensive in Turkey.

Tanhan and colleagues discuss, virtual photovoice can offer more confidentiality than a face-to-face approach (Doyumğaç et al., 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020). Melissa decided to use Zoom for the workshops despite its heavy internet usage because it offered a layer of confidentiality: Participants did not need to reveal their Skype usernames or phone numbers to each other and could control the displayed name (anonymity) and use of video. However, Melissa and Samar (who attended the second workshop to help facilitate or interpret if necessary) both experienced disrupted connections since they were subject to similarly shaky infrastructure as the other participants. Also, participants were not familiar with Zoom features like the chat and procedures for adding their pictures and descriptions to Google Drive documents, which Melissa had assumed they would be. It is possible that these difficulties were increased because they were using smartphones. This required spontaneous adjustments, primarily receiving participants' photographs by WhatsApp, and then sharing them with the group, which slightly dislocated the flow and efficiency of the workshop.

We also saw the importance of dialogue in Melissa's photovoice project. Although discussion flowed relatively easily during Melissa's workshops and participants indicated that they enjoyed the process, the shift in approach meant that participants had not met previously. Instead of a core collective from one university guiding the whole process, participants included Melissa's contacts from conferences and LinkedIn and Samar's sister, high school classmates, and fellow members of the inter-university Syrian Students' Association. Melissa's intention to create a sense of community and work through the photovoice process in a series of participatory workshops went by the wayside, as did her plans to offer refreshments and small gifts as thanks for their time. This undoubtedly changed the dynamics, asking participants to share personal experiences with virtual strangers. In such a situation, it may be preferable for both logistical and ethical reasons to follow an asynchronous approach with clear instructions and examples (Doyumğaç et al., 2020; Hiscock, 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020).

Because Melissa's project was conducted as part of her dissertation study, we also reflected on the tensions we noticed related to dissemination, as it can be difficult to disseminate findings equitably and inclusively when one person is clearly benefiting in substantial ways (graduating with a doctoral degree) and others may not be. Several of Melissa's participants asked her to share their submissions beyond her dissertation, which she

is working to do. She developed an online gallery³ for the 2021 virtual Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) conference, which included art exhibits as a new category of proposals and draws an international audience from both academia and non-governmental organizations. Melissa is cautiously optimistic that the online exhibit can reach stakeholders working with refugee and migrant students and shed light on similar experiences. She is now looking for ways to bring the participants' contributions to the attention of Turkish stakeholders – students, faculty, and administrators – perhaps by sharing the virtual exhibit through a targeted social media campaign or by holding in-person exhibits when campuses reopen.

Discussion

These two virtual photovoice projects have given us insights into the possibilities as well as the potential pitfalls and limitations of conducting photovoice at a distance. Within each case, we have reflected on several methodological lessons we have learned through these projects as well as the tensions we experienced related to each. While lessons on access and dissemination seem to go together with a move to virtual settings, our reflections on dialogue seem to strike at the heart of the photovoice method and the participatory epistemologies that undergird it.

Indeed, the central lesson we have learned about conducting photovoice in virtual spaces is to remember and rely upon photovoice's underlying ontological and epistemological commitments to creating space for knowledge creation by and for those who are closest to and most knowledgeable about an issue, problem, or phenomenon (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Wang & Burris, 1994). We see photovoice not as a method, but rather as one of many opportunities to stay true to those ontological and epistemological commitments. In fact, we argue that there is danger in treating photovoice as a method because of the opportunities that opens up to instantiate structures of power:

Although photovoice holds the potential to meaningfully include marginalized and vulnerable populations in the knowledge production process, an exploration of action research literature shows an increasing adoption of photovoice methods by entities with structural power, which Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) call the “establishment.” As a result, photovoice is becoming distanced from its critical and emancipatory epistemological underpinnings, and is moving toward a more technical, intervention-oriented model. While characterized by good intentions, and often exciting and inspiring outcomes, this model reflects an epistemology that is in contrast with that of PAR and runs the risk of reproducing binary relationships of authority (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016), such as researcher/subject, teacher/student, and knower/learner. These relationships are often explicitly or implicitly built on deficit assumptions of learning and knowing and reinforce taken-for-granted structures of power. (Freire, 1970; Call-Cummings et al., 2019a, p. 399)

While we wrote this passage in relation to an experience, we had conducting photovoice in person, the commitment to upending power structures and maintaining fidelity to participatory knowledge creation does not lose applicability when photovoice is conducted virtually. In fact, we would argue that the commitment becomes increasingly salient because

³ <https://melbeth27.wixsite.com/melissahauber/gallery>; one photograph was omitted from the online gallery because it showed the participant's face.

of the more nuanced ethical and epistemological tensions present in virtual research settings. Insisting on engaging in dialogue through and in the photovoice process is one way to fulfill this commitment, and virtual spaces provide new and potentially more democratic means to do this.

This paper builds on our previous efforts to work out the nuances of using visual participatory methods ethically and equitably (Call-Cummings et al., 2019a, 2020b; Hauber-Özer & Call-Cummings, 2020). Drawing on our typology for ethical engagement in photovoice with vulnerable migrants (Hauber-Özer & Call-Cummings, 2020), we advocate for an ethics-informed methodology that is fully rooted in participatory epistemology, committed to long-term engagement, and guided by awareness of participants' experiences and needs.

Conclusion

Earlier in this paper, we presented examples from the limited online photovoice literature that succeeded at offering photovoice opportunities to wide audiences in an online format. We appreciate these examples and acknowledge that including as many voices as possible can be important and can lead to a strong sense of impact; however, we must also question approaches that place a premium on reach and inclusivity in a one-time project at the expense of depth in the context of a longer engagement. We hope that as other researchers and practitioners engage in virtual photovoice, they will carefully consider the importance of creating space for knowledge creation in ways that make sense for the circumstances. Depending on the context, this might mean an asynchronous approach or offering instructions in live webinars. The key is to remain flexible and connected to the goals and motivations of those who are participating, but in knowledge creation and in its strategic dissemination.

In closing, we urge practitioners of virtual and online photovoice to remember the lofty but essential goals of emancipation and transformation in participatory inquiry (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Fine & Torre, 2006; Greene et al., 2013). Just collecting powerful photographs and narrative descriptions will not lead to the transformation we preach. We must ask ourselves difficult questions in critical and reflexive ways: What does genuine participation look like in virtual spaces? How can we open these spaces up more inclusively? What does action look like? Whose responsibility is it? We have begun the conversation here, offering dialogue as one option for engaging virtual photovoice that stays true to the epistemological commitments of participatory knowledge creation. We urge other research collectives to both ask and answer these questions honestly and intentionally in the context of their own research. As we do so, we will be able to offer photovoice opportunities in many formats to groups who are too often silenced but have much expertise to offer, in ways that value genuine participation as emancipation and a step toward broader transformation.

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Acknowledgements: The authors would like to acknowledge the knowledge and expertise of the youth and others who contributed to the research highlighted in this article

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Article Citation

Call-Cummings, M., & Hauber-Özer, M. (2021). Virtual photovoice: Methodological lessons and cautions. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(10), 3214-3233. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4971>