

Using photography *as a tool in action research*

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The power of images, including photographs, can be used even in projects that do not use photography as a central tool in the implementation of a project.

One of the key steps in action research, or any form of research, is to gather and document information about the work. For many community-based projects, finding appropriate and effective ways to document their project over time can be difficult and frustrating. Writing can be time-consuming, distracting from our core work, and boring! Gathering statistics is often a necessary but uninspiring aspect of our work. We long for quick, fun and easy ways to build up a record of our activities and work – something akin to jotting quick notes, yet with the coherence that we sometimes lack when we write down words quickly.

Photography is a useful and often overlooked tool for action research. Photography offers us a way to document our daily lives and experiences, as well as the bigger events and special occasions where we regularly take photos. Not only can photos be good documents of a project but also they can be useful tools in project planning, implementation, research and evaluation.

In our work with Stronger Families Fund projects photography has increasingly proved to be a valuable tool in the Stronger Families Learning Exchange toolbox. We have found photography particularly useful in contexts where more conventional methods of research and data collection are problematic due to cultural and linguistic differences, working

with young children, working across vast distances in short timeframes, or with groups of people not comfortable with written words or audio recording.

Photography as a tool in research

Photography has a significant history of use as a research tool. The fields of anthropology, sociology and history have all developed diverse methods of using photography (Collier and Collier 1986; Edwards 1992; Prosser 1998). Ethnographic and documentary photography have long histories, especially in cross-cultural research. The natural sciences have also drawn on the ability of photographs to demonstrate and record change over time and render the details of a moment visible. Photos have been used to enhance our ability to observe – a key element in any research.

In recent times photography has been used in more participatory ways, finding application in a wide variety of contexts around the world. Researchers and community work practitioners have found that as photographic technologies become cheaper and easier to use they have been valuable ways for non-professionals to contribute first-hand to a community or research project. Participatory action research requires that local participants have the opportunity to contribute their point of view to the process of learning and change that an action research project is striving for.

“Photography provides a technology that literally enables researchers and their audiences to see the world in new ways, to make the invisible visible – to say ‘hey look at this’” (Noble and Jones, in Sankaran et al. 2001). Photography can overcome a wide range of barriers to participation such as age, illiteracy, language differences, cultural differences, and even geographical distance.

Photography and participatory action research

In Australia and overseas, many community action research projects have made good use of photography, as the following examples illustrate.

Experiencing motherhood. In Victoria, the Women’s Health Goulburn North East and the Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership joined forces to develop a project called Picturing Motherhood. This project aimed to highlight issues for mothers in the local area by putting together a photography exhibition of local women’s images and experiences of motherhood. The photographers were local mothers who picked up cameras to show their unique viewpoint and experience of motherhood. Audience members were encouraged to look at the images and reflect on their own views and experiences of motherhood.

Cleaners in society. A participatory action research project that resulted in the exhibition “For the love of the people: Photography and stories from



Jalaris Aboriginal Corporation, Derby Western Australia, photo by Maya Haviland

the work and lives of seven contract cleaners” used photography to recreate the public image of cleaners in Wellington, in New Zealand. This project brought together a photography teacher and students, community arts workers, community workers and a local cleaners’ union including cleaners and officials (Noble and Jones, in Sankaran et al. 2001). The aims of the project were to honour and highlight the role of cleaners in society, make visible some of the problems they faced, and challenge negative stereotypes about cleaning work. The photography students worked with the cleaners to make the photos and then all the different participants came together to select photos to include in the exhibition. Some outcomes of this project were lots of local press coverage of the union’s message as well as the exhibition and a publication.

Children behind the lens. Recently in Woodburn, north of Newcastle in New South Wales, local children made photographs to express their perceptions of their community as part of a School as Community Place project. The kids learnt how to use disposable cameras, making images on themes about their community. They were then given the chance to talk about the images they had created and their words and pictures were displayed together. The photos played a central role in bringing the community together in a community development initiative. Through the experience of taking photos the kids learnt new skills and were given an opportunity to express their experiences of Woodburn. A community celebration and exhibition of the images were organised and were attended by locals as well as people from neighbouring areas who might

not have ever come to Woodburn before. The voices of the local children, as expressed through their photos and reflections, will be available as a contribution to future community project planning.

Guatemala project. Photography has been used with great success in Indigenous communities in many places. One example is in the Guatemalan Highlands, in the war-ravaged region known as the Ixil triangle. Photography was used as a part of a Participatory Action Research project that sought to improve the quality of community life, especially for women in communities affected by poverty and war. In this project women used photographs as a way to express and communicate their experiences and rebuild their community connections. Photography was used in this context as it provided a means to communicate



between and across boundaries, with women who mostly did not speak Spanish, nor read or write in any language. Women were trained in the use of cameras and were then given a roll of film to photograph on a chosen theme. Some of the topics chosen by the women were challenges facing women and children, culture and traditional practices. Each photographer chose five or six pictures from each roll. She would then tell the story of each picture to a small group. In the second round of analysis groups would collectively select three or four photos from the originally presented

default.htm). Images in all these contexts have formed, and will continue to form, a valuable historic and social record for future generations.

The four projects described above used photography in a central role in their project. Some of them, such as the cleaners in Wellington, began with an interest in doing a photography project, which then turned into an interesting participatory action research project. Others set out to effect some particular social change and used photography as a tool to enact that change. These projects demonstrate how photography can be

Communicating across difference

As was found in the project in Guatemala, photographs are effective ways to support communication across linguistic barriers. Words often need translation, whether it be from English into an Aboriginal language, or from street talk into formal government speak. However, images can often speak for themselves. Photos and other images such as paintings and diagrams can be very useful in establishing a non-verbal common point to begin or deepen communication across linguistic barriers.

In my work in the SFLEX team I have found that using images to communicate complex points, or to tell a story, is an easier way to establish communication than talking or presenting written words.

Photos are also an effective way to get children involved in story-telling or documenting, and allowing them to take photos often provides us with a point of view we would not have found if the camera had only been in adult hands. In one Stronger Families Fund project a disposable camera was given to young children (about five years old) and the photos revealed that they liked to play in a section of a building that everyone had previously thought was unused. This led to that area being cleaned up and designated a children's play area where it had previously been earmarked for adult use.

Providing a visual context

Photographs of landscapes, buildings and places of significance can be an instant and effective way to provide context to a project or event. Pictures of a place help us to conjure up the experience of a different environment through memory or imagination.

Places and environment play a huge part in our human experience of a community and daily life and are often left out of the "story" we tell with words. Before the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop in 2003, Stronger Families Fund projects sent in photos of where their project is located, with a picture of the building or surrounding landscape of the



Map of Australia from the SFF National Workshop, 2003

photos and would analyse them in the context of the other photos and stories. This process, which happened gradually over seven years in various stages, became a valuable way for local illiterate peasant women to tell stories of themselves and their community and come together to create shared meaning and stories of their collective and individual experiences. The understanding of the experiences of local women and their families created through the photography and dialogue process have gone on to inform future funding and directions for community programs in this area (Lykes, in Reason and Bradbury 2001).

Community photography has also led to commercial success for some in the form of books, postcards and posters (<http://chiapasphoto.org/>

more than simply a tool for illustrating and documenting a community or research project.

Photography can be used to create its own kind of knowledge, and is much more than an adjunct to more mainstream qualitative research methods. The power of images, including photographs, can be used even in projects that do not use photography as a central tool in the implementation of a project. Some of the advantages of using photography as a tool in action research are outlined below.

Advantages of photography in action research

There are several good reasons why photographs are an effective and valuable means of documenting a community or research project.

project. Some people sent in pictures of significant landmarks around their project. After registration on the first day, workshop participants had the opportunity to place a card with a description of their project and the photos they had sent in onto a map of Australia. This map became a focal point over the days of the workshop for conversations between workshop participants who had not met each other before.

A picture speaks a thousand words

Photographs can be an effective way to get peoples' attention and engagement in an idea or project. A photo, or a group of photos, can communicate about our work and experiences in an instant, where it might otherwise take the proverbial thousand words to communicate similar information. In our busy, noisy and harried world, one that is often over-filled with words and text, a photo can be a welcome and accessible way into someone else's experience.

Bureaucracies and organisations can seem to drown in paper, but the people who make up these organisations respond to the human face of a project more easily when they look into a photograph and see a real person's smile. I recently showed a photo album from a trip to a Stronger Families Fund project to someone who knew nothing of the project or my work with them. The photo book mapped my journey and showed some context about the community in which the project is located. I passed this photo album around at a social occasion upon my return, letting the pictures and captions speak for themselves. They grabbed the attention of one person to such an extent that he arranged an article featuring the project to appear in a journal. All this without any verbal description of the project or my work with them.

Difficulties of photography in action research

Although photography is a valuable and often overlooked tool for community work and research it is not without drawbacks and difficulties. Some practical concerns need to be

considered when using any form of photography.

Cost

Imaging technology is continuing to improve and is now readily available to non-experts. Digital cameras have made it easy to produce high quality images with a home computer. However, there is still a cost involved. Even printing your own images from a digital camera usually adds up to a similar cost to getting prints made in a commercial lab because of ink and paper. In the Stronger Families Learning exchange and some Stronger Families Fund projects, as well as some of the projects described in this article, disposable cameras have been found to be useful tools. However, they can become costly as a project grows and have the disadvantage of being only for one-off usage.

Alison Campbell, the coordinator of the Woodburn project, has noted that the cost of creating and developing the images, as well as the cost of preparing and mounting them for exhibition, could make the method used in that project prohibitive to other community groups.

As with any form of community work and research, making the project sustainable in the local context is crucial to its ongoing success. I have found that technological difficulties and lack of facilities in remote areas can cause substantial problems. (Here, it can be noted that creating partnerships with professional photographers or photography students is a very viable option in the realm of community action and research. In Australia many artists and students will happily exchange their time and technical expertise for experience in a community setting.)

Permission and ethics

Photographs are powerful and not everyone is comfortable with "giving away" their image, especially when they do not know what use may be made of it in the future. In action research ethical issues must be strongly considered in planning and using photography. Informed consent for all future uses of a photo must be obtained before it is used. At

SFLEX we have developed an easy-to-use ethics guide with forms that can be adapted for individual projects (see *Ethics Made Easy* on the Stronger Families Learning Exchange website at www.aifs.gov.au/sflex.)

At the National Workshop we ran into difficulty getting signed permission for all the people whose photos were taken. Because the conference was a public event, legally we do not require consent for images of people in a public place. However, legal and relational ethics can be a little different. Because we are committed to maintaining relationships of trust and integrity with the people we work with, we thought long and hard about issues of consent in taking and using photos from the conference.

Some of the strategies we used were: announcing at the workshop that photos would be taken, and encouraging participants to decline requests for a photo to be taken if they were not comfortable with it; making consent forms freely available for people to read and to sign if they wished; and, after the workshop, using our email discussion list to check with participants that they were happy for us to use some of the group photos in upcoming presentations and publications.

In other contexts permission and informed consent are critical. I am aware of issues around the use of photography in research with children arising from concerns about child protection. Concerns have been raised about the need to ensure the restriction of future use of images of children strictly to research purposes, and also about how to handle what may appear in images created by children. Standard ethical protection, such as protocols for the reporting of child abuse, should be in place before cameras are introduced into a community or research setting.

Archiving, storing and defining images

Another basic practical concern is the archiving and storage of images. At SFLEX we found that we have quickly amassed thousands of images from the different Stronger Families Fund projects. Creating a photo archive



has become an unwieldy and daunting task. I would recommend to anyone undertaking even very minor use of photos in their work to create a system for labelling and safely storing the images before they begin work, to save heartache and frustration later. Some less tangible but equally important constraints to consider in using photos, especially in a research context, have to do with what is in a photo, as well as what is left out. There is extensive discussion in the literature about visual-based research about a variety of issues to do with analysis of images, point of view and context of images (Prosser 1998). I

logical aspects and the content are vital to being able to use that language¹.

Leaving things out – Where’s “Bradley”?

An image in a photo is framed by the edges of the photo and so inevitably leaves things out. Although photographs can provide a very rich illustration and source of knowledge in themselves, they are, by definition, incomplete pictures of an event, place or even a person. Cropping can also mean that an original image is dramatically changed by focusing in on one aspect, or by cutting something else out.

Methods of using photography in an action research context

In SFLEX’s work with Stronger Families Fund projects a variety of different methods of using photography have developed as part of action research practice. None of the projects is using photography in the *central role* described in the participatory action research case studies at the beginning of this article. Instead photography is being used as *one tool* in the process of data collection, participation and communication about a project.

Following are brief illustrations of some of the ways photography has



Photo by author after painting exercise at Jalaris, Derby, WA



Photo by Travis, age 8, after same event

will only mention some issues that have arisen out of work with Stronger Families Fund projects in this article.

Point of view

Perhaps one of the most significant issues to consider in using images in action research is who took the picture. There are issues of power and privileged access to technology in using photos, as with the written word. Although photos are often used to overcome issues such as illiteracy, they can equally be used to “research on” people rather than “research with”. Using easy-to-use technology, such as disposable cameras rather than fancy expensive manual cameras, can help to open up access to image creation. It is important to consider that photography is another language, and a level of literacy in both the techno-

This was illustrated for me in one project where we used photography a lot. One of the main project workers does not like having his photo taken and has, as is his right, refused permission for his photo to be used in any public context. While not dramatically impacting on the overall effectiveness of photography in this context, I have noted that the “story” told in the pictures of the project leaves “Bradley” out altogether. Although I know that he is a central part of the project’s work, someone who is unfamiliar with the project may never know he exists from the images. In this context it has become very important to use multiple methods for documentation and research to ensure that a balanced and rich picture of the project is presented.

been used in the context of Stronger Families Fund action research.

Visual diaries

A visual diary uses images instead of words. The photo book I showed my colleague that resulted in a journal article was essentially a visual diary of the trip I had made. I used the camera to make visual records of key moments along my journey. Together they added up to a very descriptive visual story of my experience.

One Stronger Families Fund project has taken the idea of a visual diary a step further and created a means for many participants in their project to contribute to it. They have created an interactive display on the wall of their main office where photos, drawings and notes from the project’s activities are stuck up in chronological order.

Over time they have built up a rich visual diary of the project, with images contributed by different participants added as they become available. Photos of this display are then used as the basis of writing up reports on their activities.

Before and after

Photos can be a quick and excellent way to show change over time. Before and after photos can show physical and environmental changes in a quick and clear way. Before and after photos can also be used to document or express changes that are not as tangible as renovating a building. Some projects have used photos as a way to get participants to express their experiences at the beginning and end of a project or activity, asking them to take a photo that captures their mood at the beginning of an intervention or project and then contrasting it with another photo taken at the end.

Storybooks

Using pictures and words together is probably the most common way of using photos. Some projects have made storybooks on different initiatives that use photos as illustration, or as a key way to tell the story. Projects working in communities where English is a second (or third!) language have developed storybooks about project initiatives that rely heavily on the photos to tell the story so that it can be read by people who do not read English. Some of these storybooks have been used as reports to funding bodies as they tell the story of development and change in a more engaging and accessible way than a traditional report.

Using disposable cameras

Disposable cameras have been used widely in SFLEX. We have found that they are an easy way to get participants' points of view. I have used them with children who could not contribute their opinion through conversation or interviews. Giving kids a disposable camera can result in images that tell a story different from an adult perspective (see photos on previous page).

At the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop we made disposable cameras

available to participants and the result was hundreds of photos of the workshop in action. Participants taking photos can result in less formal images that reflect the experience of a project rather than its glossy face.

One project has experimented with using disposable cameras and the resulting images as a form of consultation with the community about what issues are important to them. Cameras were given to community members with instructions to take photos of key issues or themes in their community. These images can then be used as part of the planning of future interventions and as an expression of needs to decision makers. The project experimenting with this method found that while it has been partially successful in some contexts, there are some limitations with using disposable cameras as many of the cameras handed out never made it back to project workers to be developed!

A final word – multiple methods and rigour

As you can see, there are a variety of ways that photography can be used in an action research process. It can play as big or as small a role as you want. If you are inspired, the best way to begin is to pick up a camera and experiment.

However, as with all qualitative research methods the best way to ensure that you are undertaking useful, valid and rigorous research is to use multiple methods, of which photography can most definitely be one (Branigan 2002). Most Stronger Families Fund projects using photography use it as one of a suite of research tools and are finding that it is a valuable way to enrich their data, encourage wider participation in the research process, and communicate their stories and experiences to wider audiences.

Good luck with your image making!

Note

1 This is an area of extensive debate, especially in the fields of visual anthropology and ethnographic film. Some

interesting experiments in subverting dominant power relations in the creation and analysis of images have been documented in these fields. Some work has been done in this area around inviting "subjects" to analyse images of themselves by anthropologists and filmmakers, such as Connor, Asch and Asch (1986).

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