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## Abstract

Based on a case study of a participatory photography project with a Salvadoran adult literacy program, this article explores some of the challenges and risks that arise when people use cameras to document their lives. The article examines the unanticipated problems the author and participants encountered (i.e. suspicion, timidity, and ridicule), and elucidates how historical and sociocultural factors structured learners' and community residents' responses to photography. Additionally, the article identifies how participants benefited from the project and discusses implications for the use of participatory photography. Drawing on Foucault's analysis of surveillance and power, the author argues that photography is a technology with contradictory potential for social control and surveillance, and for the recovery of marginalized groups' subjugated knowledge. Although participatory photography has many potential benefits, researchers and educators must also anticipate its unintended consequences, attend to ethical considerations, and recognize how this tool is mediated by the sociocultural setting.

## Keywords

adult literacy, El Salvador, knowledge, participatory photography, Photovoice, power, social control, sociocultural setting

## Introduction

Participatory photography has become a popular tool for researchers, educators, and other professionals, particularly those working with marginalized groups. Although the literature has enumerated many benefits of participatory photography, I join those scholars (e.g. Lykes, Blanche & Hamber, 2003; McIntyre and

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Lykes, 2004; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Williams & Lykes, 2003) who have called attention to its risks, ethical quandaries, and power dynamics. The purpose of this article is to examine the unanticipated problems that arose during a participatory photography project with *campesinos/as* (peasants, rural people) in a Salvadoran adult literacy program. In so doing, I hope to raise awareness of photography's dual potential for social control and surveillance, and for collective learning and action.

In participatory photography and variations such as Photovoice (Wang, 1999), people use cameras to represent their experiences and perspectives on a given topic such as community strengths and problems. After collectively discussing and analyzing the photos, participants typically create a product (e.g. book, exhibit) and/or use the photos to inform community projects and advocate for their interests. Such projects have the potential to subvert hierarchical professional-participant relationships, enabling ordinary people to investigate and represent their lives. Due to its wide appeal, participatory photography has been used with children, youth, and adults in varied settings, including education (Barndt, 2001; Ewald, 2001; Gallo, 2001; Luttrell, 2006; McAllister, Wilson, Green & Baldwin, 2005; Spielman, 2001), women's groups and organizations (Lykes, 2001; Lykes et al., 1999; McIntyre, 2003), and public health (Chiu, 2006; Wang, 1999), among others.

Some (but not all) of these studies (e.g. McAllister et al., 2005; Spielman, 2001) provide few details about the photography process or present a somewhat romanticized view of participatory photography's transformative results (e.g. Gallo, 2001). Such accounts tend to underplay risks and problems, perpetuate a binary between 'silencing' and 'giving voice' (Lykes et al., 2003), and portray cameras as an acultural, intrinsically liberating technology that produces similar results in any socio-cultural setting. Given increased state, corporate, and citizen surveillance through new technologies such as computer spyware, camera phones (Weiss, 2004), and social networking sites, a judicious stance toward photography is warranted.

Drawing on my experiences with Salvadoran *campesinos/as*, I argue that participatory photography may have unanticipated, contradictory consequences, both enabling people to express themselves in new ways and generating suspicion and embarrassment. Using Foucault's (1975/1995, 1980) analysis of surveillance and power, I propose that photography has countervailing potential as a technology of surveillance and a way to recover subjugated knowledge. The article examines the suspicion photography aroused, the ways *pena* (shame, timidity, embarrassment) hindered some learners from taking pictures, and participants' actual or anticipated experience of criticism by villagers. Additionally, I identify the sociocultural factors that structured how learners and villagers responded to photography and discuss how learners benefited from the project. The case reveals that although participatory photography has many potential benefits, we must also recognize how it shapes and is shaped by distinctive sociocultural settings. Through reflection on my own practice, this case highlights the risks of making naïve assumptions about photography and of paying insufficient attention to ethical issues and sociocultural contexts, thereby alerting others to the kinds of pitfalls they too may encounter.

## Theoretical framework

According to Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), Photovoice, a version of participatory photography, is rooted in three theoretical traditions: Freire's (1973) philosophy of problem-posing education, which utilized photographs and drawings to foster critical analysis of social problems and collective action; feminist theory (Maguire, 1987; Williams & Lykes, 2003), which explicitly elicits women's perspectives; and community-based photography, which posits that ordinary people can use 'images of themselves' to 'counteract stereotypes' (Spence, 1995, p. 35, cited in Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001, p. 561) and support their struggle for self-determination. Participatory photography is also wedded to participatory action research (PAR), for it integrates education, collaborative investigation, and action, and seeks to benefit less powerful groups (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Specifically, participatory photography can activate the propositional, practical, experiential, and presentational knowledge central to co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996). Presentational knowing reflects our 'intuitive grasp of the significance of our resonance with and imaging of our world, as expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms' (Heron, 1996, p. 33), including photography. Participants visually represent their experiences (presentational knowing), while also learning how to take photographs (practical knowing), interacting with people in new ways (experiential knowing), and developing new conceptual understandings (propositional knowing).

Powerful learning and action can result when people whose perspectives are seldom recognized visually document their world (Barndt, 2001). These benefits include validation of local knowledge (Spielman, 2001), new perspectives of oneself and one's situation (McIntyre, 2003), increased self-esteem (Ewald, 2001; Lykes et al., 2003), enhanced gender equity (Lykes et al., 2003), group reflection and solidarity (Lykes et al., 2003), and collective advocacy and action (McAllister et al., 2005; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001), among others. While recognizing these benefits, this study builds on research analyzing the challenges of participatory photography. Williams and Lykes (2003) detailed several problems in a PAR project, including Mayan women's reluctance to take pictures, the need to obtain husband's permission, 'not remembering how to use the camera, being afraid to ask someone for permission to take their picture, and worrying about what neighbors would say seeing a Mayan woman taking pictures' (p. 290). People have also questioned whether 'informally educated rural women' (Lykes et al., 2003) and black South African children (Ewald, 2001), for example, could have produced such high-quality work. Participant-photographers may encounter hostility (Ewald, 2001) or discover that their photos have created controversy (Ewald, 2001; Williams & Lykes, 2003). Within-group tensions and disagreements present additional challenges, especially when creating collective texts (McIntyre & Lykes, 2004). These accounts reveal that taking and viewing photographs is embedded in local histories and asymmetrical class, racial, and gender relations.

Ethical dilemmas in Photovoice projects have included invasion of privacy, 'disclosure of embarrassing facts about individuals', 'being placed in false light by images', using a person's image for profit, and issues concerning recruitment, representation, participation, and advocacy (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). To mitigate such risks, Wang and colleagues begin with a discussion of photography, ethics, and power (see also Lykes et al., 1999, p. 218), and require various consent forms. Researchers must also anticipate the possibility of disturbing or controversial images and the powerful emotional responses evoked by photography (Ewald, 2001). Wisdom and sensitivity are required to navigate these dilemmas as well as the blurred lines between researchers and participants (McIntyre & Lykes, 2004). Additionally, researchers must realize that taking pictures or making videos does not 'mean that [a participant] is now "free" to tell just any story about herself' or that she is released from researchers' scrutiny (Pini, 2001, para. 24). As an imagined audience, researchers inevitably shape participant actions in subtle, if unintended, ways.

This article draws on Foucauldian conceptions of power and surveillance (1975/1995, 1980; Vaz & Bruno, 2003) to argue that photography is a 'technology [practice] of power' with contradictory potential. On one hand, equipping adult learners, women, or members of other marginalized groups to investigate and represent their lives through photographs can recover or reactivate 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1980), that is, bring to light knowledge otherwise deemed invalid because it does not conform to scientific discourse. Photography enables people to exercise power by subverting the 'inspecting gaze' that has historically defined how they are represented, by challenging dominant notions of what counts as knowledge (Chambers, 1997), and by using their visual representations to influence decision-making regarding policies, program design, and the like.

Photography, however, can also operate as a technology of surveillance that breeds distrust and facilitates social control. As an example of modern surveillance, Foucault (1975/1995, 1980) analyzed the Panopticon, an invention that subjected prisoners to centralized observation. Prisoners internalized the knowledge they were being (or could be) watched, and subsequently monitored their own – and others' – actions, eliminating the need for force. Foucault (1980) described this surveillance system as 'an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself', and 'each comrade becomes an overseer' (pp. 155, 157). It is precisely the subject's 'permanent visibility' that 'maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection' (1975/1995, p. 187). In this way, the Panopticon operates as 'an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust' (1980, p. 158). In modern societies, Foucault (1975/1995) argues, panopticism – that is, disciplinary power or techniques that subject people to constant classification and surveillance by others and the self – is the chief mechanism of power, coercion, and control.

Foucault's insights offer two implications for this study. First, the violation of social norms increases individuals' visibility, subjecting them to others' scrutiny;

consequently, participants may be hesitant to take photographs if doing so increases their visibility to the point of discomfort. Second, in communities with a history of surveillance and betrayal by the state or citizens, people may perceive cameras and photography as instruments of surveillance and social control.

## Setting and methods

The photography project was one component of an eight-month ethnographic study (2001–02) undertaken for my dissertation research. The larger study examined how participation in adult literacy education enables and/or constrains women's and men's personal, relational, and collective empowerment (Prins, 2003, 2008). I conducted the research with Alfalit, a progressive Salvadoran, Christian non-governmental organization (NGO) that sponsored rural community development. The literacy program, funded by the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) and ProLiteracy, took place in Colima and Rosario de Mora, rural villages located within 50 kilometers of San Salvador. In both villages the primary livelihoods were subsistence agriculture, seasonal wage labor, the informal economy, women's unpaid labor, and (in Colima) remittances.

The civil war (1980–92) bred a culture of fear and distrust of government, outsiders, and other citizens, oftentimes expressed through envy, gossip, and interpersonal animosity (Dickson-Gómez, 2002), as well as reluctance to join community projects for fear of retribution. Fear, mistrust, and resistance to collective efforts were evident both in Colima, which was a war-time conflict zone, and Rosario de Mora, which was not. As I will argue, the collective memory and consequences of the civil war – for example, incidents of war-time betrayal by neighbors – help explain why the photography project evoked some suspicion in Colima.

Led by community volunteers, the four-month literacy program was open to all teenagers and adults. The volunteer facilitators formed ten literacy classes comprising mainly neighbors and relatives. Regular attendees included 27 women and 26 men, aged 13 to 66, with a zero to sixth grade education and varying literacy abilities. The program used a Freirean-inspired curriculum featuring a workbook with generative themes (e.g. education), accompanying drawings or photos, and literacy exercises. The study integrated ethnographic research methods with participatory research activities, including photography. I chose ethnographic research methods because I wanted to understand the program in the 'fuller, more meaningful context' (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455) of adult learners' daily lives. I lived in Colima with the family of Tatiana (pseudonym), a literacy facilitator, and regularly visited Rosario de Mora. My prior visits to El Salvador, fluency in Spanish, and connection to a local family helped me establish trust and rapport, lessening the social distance produced by my identity as a White, highly educated woman and US citizen.

The study focused on Tatiana's class of nine women and two men and also incorporated research activities with four other classes in both villages. Learners in Tatiana's class considered me a teacher because I occasionally

taught the class in Tatiana's absence and conducted weekly interactive research activities during the regularly scheduled class time. I recorded in fieldnotes observations of daily life and events, informal conversations, and literacy classes, and conducted interviews with 21 learners and five facilitators, among others. This article also incorporates Colima learners' unprompted comments about the photography project, collected during a 2007 follow-up study.

Departing from traditional ethnography, I planned research activities using a participatory approach (Maguire, 1987), based on my belief that people have a right to be involved in research that affects them (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). These activities included the participatory photography project and 29 interactive focus groups utilizing gender analysis, popular education, and visual participatory rural appraisal methods (e.g. mapping, Chambers, 1997). Due to limited time and financial resources, logistical challenges, and distance from El Salvador before fieldwork, learners did not formulate the research questions or make decisions about all aspects of the project; however, I developed the research focus and questions through conversations with CRWRC and Alfalit staff. In this study, participation entailed collective production and discussion of learners' knowledge about their lives, communities, and the literacy program. By creating and interpreting data (e.g. maps, photos, skits), I believed participants would enjoy themselves, learn from each other, and enhance communicative and civic capacities such as listening.

## **The participatory photography project**

Inspired by the accounts of two colleagues who had used participatory photography in Bolivia and the US (neither of whom mentioned encountering practical or ethical challenges), I believed participatory photography would be a creative tool for self-expression, enable learners to play a more active role in the study, and generate insights into the research questions. I had read widely in PAR and related literatures, but I discovered the research on participatory photography, including critical accounts, only after returning from the field. These studies would have helped me anticipate potential problems; however, I did not seek them out because photography was a minor part of the study. Although not ideal, this approach – taking a creative idea and running with it – is often the way research unfolds.

The purpose of the project was to enable participants to document from their own perspective the most important aspects of their lives and communities and the ways they had changed by attending literacy classes, while also generating data for the study. All learners and facilitators from the five remaining classes were invited to participate. All 17 learners from the two Colima classes and ten learners and two facilitators from the three Rosario de Mora classes (12 women and 17 men) took photographs. During an orientation session I provided oral and written guidelines and taught participants how to use disposable cameras, since none had ever used one. I explained the project's purpose was 'to show how participating in the literacy classes has helped you make positive changes in your life', 'to represent the most

important aspects of your life so that the literacy program can relate to your needs and interests', and 'to give you the opportunity to express your way of seeing things'. Assuming that photography was a benign technology, I did not adequately prepare participants for the ethical and social issues implicated in photography, nor did I anticipate the suspicion cameras might arouse.

Since each person had only 13 or 14 photos (two people shared each camera), I created prompts that would both provide some structure and cover broad topics, for instance, take four photos of themes the literacy class should include and five photos demonstrating changes resulting from attending literacy classes and their experience in the class. (Aspects of learners' lives that did not change were explored in subsequent interviews in 2001 and 2007.) Additionally, I asked questions to help participants identify how visually to represent hypothetical topics. Participants then spent two weeks taking photos, during which time I discussed the project with Tatiana's class and several other Colima learners, and accompanied two Rosario de Mora participants as they decided how to portray life changes such as helping their mothers with housework. To represent the latter, for example, Antonio composed pictures in which he chopped wood and washed a shirt (Figure 1), a task considered 'women's work'.

After receiving their photos, participants made a poster featuring six of their favorites and corresponding captions (Figure 2), a format that built literacy skills and fit the project budget. During a second session participants presented the posters to their respective classes, explaining the meanings of each photo.



**Figure 1.** 'Ayudar en el oficio doméstico de la casa' [Helping with domestic housework].



Each session concluded with a discussion of what people learned from the project and the presentations. This combination of activities enabled participants to draw upon presentational and propositional knowing (Heron, 1996). Group presentations, like the interviews and focus groups, were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by a Salvadoran.

Within this project participation entailed deciding what to photograph, composing and taking photographs, making and presenting collages, discussing the meanings of their own and others' pictures, and keeping their photographs and posters. The findings reveal that visually documenting their lives and literacy class experiences was a meaningful form of participation, one that made learners feel valued. Although I wanted this to be participants' own project, a few described picture-taking as a task or homework assignment (i.e. an important responsibility), perhaps because they associated the project with literacy classes (see Luttrell, 2006) or because my presence as an 'invisible observer' shaped their interpretations (Pini, 2001).

This article is based on analysis of fieldnotes and transcript data regarding the photography project and sociocultural factors that shaped responses to the project, focusing primarily on Colima. Many of the sociocultural insights, for instance, concerning the consequences of the civil war, draw on experiential knowledge I gained prior to and during the study, supported by data and scholarly analysis. Relevant data quality measures include the extensive use of fieldnote evidence (Sanjek, 1990) and prolonged engagement, persistent observation of classes and village life, triangulation of data sources (Patton, 1990) such as photos, focus



**Figure 2.** Literacy participants display their photo posters.

groups, and fieldnotes, and member checks, that is, paraphrasing learners' responses to clarify understanding during the poster presentations and discussion (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I turn now to elaborating the challenges that arose in this project.

### **Unanticipated problems: suspicion, *pena*, and criticism**

Approximately one week after distributing the cameras, I asked learners in Tatiana's class how the exercise was going. As I recorded in my fieldnotes, Esmeralda had encountered some unexpected problems:

She went to the *cañal* [sugar cane field] to take a picture of it and the owner came up and asked her what she was doing. She explained. He asked who was in charge of this project and she gave him my name. He said that I was telling her to take pictures of it so that I could come and '*darle fuego*' [set it on fire]. Then Esmeralda went to the school to take a picture of it and the [principal] and a few teachers ended up talking to her and asking why she was taking pictures there. Again, they asked who was in charge and she gave them my name and mentioned Alfalit. 'If one child disappears, we're going to go look for her [author]' [translated from Spanish], they said. . . Then Esmeralda went to take a picture of a large [farm machine] and . . . the owner said that I was having her take pictures so that I could come and steal it. My jaw was on the floor. I was absolutely incredulous and dumbfounded that anyone could think that, just from a community member coming to take pictures. . . [An Alfalit employee later explained that Ministry of Education wanted schools to take precautions due to recent cases of kidnappings and disappearances at schools.] . . . When I take a step back, though, [these incidents] just signal the level of distrust that exists in this community and in the country as a whole, as well as the fear of violence, and the tendency to suspect white people of kidnapping children. That community residents can't even take pictures in their own community without people suspecting some ulterior motive is very telling. And the fact that they would attribute an evil motive to me is even more telling.

Initially, I was shocked that these problems occurred and felt angry that people, albeit individuals I had never met, attributed harmful intentions to me. Since the photographers were community members, I had not anticipated that the 'innocent' act of taking pictures would arouse suspicion. Upon further reflection, these events generated insights into local social relations, views of North Americans, and my erroneous assumptions about learners' and residents' responses to photography.

The second difficulty was that some participants had trouble deciding what to photograph, were too timid to take pictures, or endured ridicule by villagers who said that they did not know what they were doing or that the pictures would not turn out (see Ewald, 2001). For instance, Miguel told his classmates:

I don't know if any of the other *compañeros* [companions, friends] experienced the same thing I did, because they called me crazy. They told me I was crazy, that I was insane for going around taking photos outside. Yes, I knew it was like homework I

had to do, so I had to do it. It didn't... matter to me what people said. Because they told me I was crazy, that 'you've never had a camera'. I told them, 'This isn't mine. They've lent it to me so I can do homework.'

The five other men in his class did not encounter such problems, but another Colima learner reported a similar experience.

I also learned that a teenage girl and a middle-aged woman, Rachel, had asked Rachel's daughter to take pictures for them because they did not know what to photograph:

I asked [Rachel] what the difficulty had been and she said 'It shames/embarrasses me. People here criticize you when they see you taking pictures. "What are you taking pictures for?" they say. That's why I didn't go...' [translated from Spanish]... She was embarrassed to take [pictures] in her own community because she was afraid of what people might think of or say about her. I told her to think of herself as an *investigadora* [researcher] because that's what she is – investigating and analyzing her community. So this is about *pena* [shame, timidity, embarrassment] and gossip and what will X think of me... The same things that prevented people from attending the literacy circle [class] in the first place also prevent them from taking pictures. They're embarrassed and scared of what others might say. I think it's also indicative of the lack of trust and '*unión*' [unity] in Colima. (fieldnotes)

Rachel's comments suggest that she and perhaps other learners were embarrassed to take photographs because they anticipated ridicule and criticism from peers (see Williams & Lykes, 2003). As I encouraged Rachel and asked questions to help elicit her ideas for the project, her husband, Chepe, entered their home and began telling Rachel what to photograph. 'I [tried] my best to prevent Chepe from influencing what pictures she would take, while trying to let him express himself' (fieldnotes). Although he was trying to be helpful, I wanted the pictures to reflect Rachel's perspectives, so before leaving I wrote in Rachel's notebook the ideas we had discussed. With this encouragement, Rachel eventually overcame her *pena* and took pictures of subjects she considered important.

## Contributing sociocultural factors

These incidents suggest photography is a practice of power (Foucault, 1975/1995, 1980) that evokes divergent responses. Technologies that increase visibility are a means of social control; as such, taking pictures renders people vulnerable by making them and their possessions visible. Participant-photographers also make themselves more visible and hence susceptible to criticism, especially where picture-taking is uncommon. Accordingly, we see in these events the perception that photography is a tool of surveillance that contributes to mistrust and suspicion of ill intent, and the ways in which picture-taking may violate social norms, thereby subjecting participant-photographers to ridicule or other sanctions.

In this section, I delineate the sociocultural clues that help explain these incidents. First, villagers' responses to photography should be interpreted in light of political repression and the civil war, which generated a climate of fear, distrust, and suspicion of government, neighbors, and outsiders (Dickson-Gómez, 2002). During the conflict the military and death squads used surveillance – including pictures – to identify alleged guerrilla sympathizers, tens of thousands of whom were tortured, disappeared, or killed. Civilians also spied on and betrayed each other, teaching *campesinos/as* that 'neighbors as well as government forces, are capable of betrayal, extreme violence, and duplicity' (Dickson-Gómez, 2002, p. 420). Several Colimeños recounted such stories of betrayal, and facilitators from Rosario de Mora told me villagers still lived with fear, even though the village had not been a conflict zone. The collective memory of war-time surveillance and continuing mistrust illuminate why some Colimeños seemed to perceive photography as an 'inspecting gaze' (Foucault, 1980) that could lead to harmful events. That an unknown North American had asked learners to take photographs undoubtedly exacerbated their suspicion.

A second relevant factor is Salvadoran *campesinos/as*' belief in *hechicería* (sorcery) and *brujería* (witchcraft) (see e.g. Cervantes, 1994). According to Colima participants, *hechicería* entails harming or putting a curse on someone through a *brujo/a* (witch, sorcerer), often because of jealousy and hatred. I learned about the photography-*hechicería* connection when a study participant and her family told me, on two separate occasions, that *brujos* could use pictures to cast spells. For instance, they urged me not to give a neighbor boy a picture I had taken of him and my partner (visiting from the US) because the boy's mother was a *bruja*. Indeed, learners and villagers of all religious backgrounds often attributed harmful events such as illness to *hechicería*. Insofar as villagers perceived pictures as a tool for *hechicería*, they would understandably question why learners were taking photographs and why an unknown North American woman asked them to do so. The link between *hechicería* and photography also illustrates how being seen can subject individuals to others' control (Foucault, 1975/1995, 1980).

Third, the principal's concern about kidnapping echoed recent events and US–Latin America relations. Several child kidnappings and murders occurred during my fieldwork, and although the perpetrators were Central Americans school personnel were evidently suspicious of my motives. Additionally, these suspicions reflect the widespread Central American belief that foreigners – especially *gringas* (White US or Canadian women) who allegedly possess 'dark powers' (Adams, 1998) – kidnap and sell children for organ-harvesting, illegal adoptions, or sexual exploitation (Adams, 1998; Briggs, 2006). By positioning me as a potential child kidnapper, the principal situated the photography project in the wider Latin American discourse concerning US foreign policy and child exploitation (Briggs, 2006), a discourse shaped by the region's history of colonization and US military intervention. The principal's association of photography with kidnapping also illustrates Foucault's (1980) concept of 'circulating mistrust' – the pervasive suspicion that results when people monitor each other. Her reaction reveals she viewed

the camera – even in the hands of a community resident – as a technology of power with potentially terrible consequences.

Finally, taking photos appeared to violate local social norms, increasing participants' visibility and rendering them vulnerable to criticism and ridicule for being 'crazy' or inept. Such remarks enforced social norms by classifying people who took pictures as abnormal or 'insane' (Foucault, 1975/1995). As Vaz and Bruno (2003) put it, individuals 'fear potential abnormality not only in others but also within themselves, and thus refrain from doing what would characterize them, in their own eyes, as abnormal' (p. 278). In these villages taking photographs in public was an abnormal, visible act that set learners apart, partly because *campesinos/as* could not afford cameras, film, or developing. (During 16 years of travel to El Salvador, I do not recall seeing a *campesino/a* other than a hired photographer take a picture.) The exchange between Miguel and a villager ('You've never had a camera.' 'This isn't mine, they've lent it to me...') suggests that both the camera's expense and the act of taking pictures heightened participants' visibility. Additionally, reluctance to take pictures indicates that, to varying degrees, some learners had internalized the 'inspecting gaze' and 'reign of opinion' (Foucault, 1980) regarding socially acceptable behavior. This helps elucidate why several learners – especially women – were embarrassed to be seen taking pictures, a response that illustrates self-surveillance (Foucault, 1980; Vaz & Bruno, 2003), or 'self-monitoring through the belief that one is under constant scrutiny' (Wood, 2003, p. 325). Such incidents demonstrate how the internalization of prevailing norms and the 'inspecting gaze' encourages people to regulate their own behavior, in this case, limiting their willingness to take photographs in public.

## Benefits of participatory photography

Despite these unanticipated difficulties, participants described numerous ways they benefited from the project, benefits that illustrate the recovery of subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980). First, the project enhanced participants' personal and intellectual development. For example, a facilitator observed that learners 'felt valuable because they participated' in taking photos: Being entrusted with and learning to use a camera granted them recognition. Similarly, when recounting her memories of the literacy class and research activities during a 2007 follow-up interview, Karla María remarked that she 'felt really important' when she took the photographs. Her comments suggest that despite its shortcomings, the photography project communicated to participants that they and their ideas mattered.

Learners also developed a sense of pride and overcame some of their timidity. As Esmeralda noted, they took pride in learning a new skill and completing an important task:

[in a playful tone] Well, I also suffered a lot going around taking photos because I received many disparaging remarks. [group laughter] They shamed me [laughs] ... because they said that it was to set the sugar cane on fire. But with time I came out

ahead... But I thank God, because I took [the pictures]. I took them with a lot of effort, but I took them... I completed the task I'd been given.

Although Esmeralda perhaps interpreted the project in unintended ways, she was nevertheless proud of her accomplishment – and her pride was still evident in our 2007 interview. The project also stimulated reflection and helped learners overcome their *pena*, as César shared: ‘Well, on my part, I feel that it’s helped me because I’ve lost a little bit of my *pena*. And these [photos] make you think. I think that’s how you develop your mind a little bit more.’ In particular, making presentations in front of a group—in most cases for the first time—bolstered confidence.

Sharing the cameras also fostered collaboration and respectful communication, as when Carlos observed, ‘I feel that I learned to make friends because we shared the cameras with others from the class. We shared moments taking photos.’ Two women explained that since they had few opportunities to leave the house, the project enabled them to explore the community with other people and to talk about the pictures they had taken or planned to take.

Some participants, like Karla María, gained a different or deeper understanding of their community:

Well, what I learned was that there is so much pretty scenery here in Colima. And that [pretty scenery] isn’t just found in other places. If we put it into practice, we could have more scenery even prettier than in other places. [Esther: And before you didn’t think there were pretty places here? Have you always thought this way?] We had never seen [the scenes] in a photograph. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘how pretty. Well I’m going to take [a photo] because this scenery is pretty.’

Karla María suggests that taking and viewing photographs helps make the familiar strange, allowing people to see commonplace subjects with new eyes. Such re-framing is fundamental to learning and attachment to place (McIntyre, 2003).

Other participants like Esperanza claimed they learned to place more importance on community problems:

I learned how to know the community’s needs, like work, water, the work needs of men and women – all of that. And how to see the... problems of the community... Before we didn’t even place much importance on community problems, friends, or anything. And now that you’ve done this activity, we’ve known what the community problems are. We’ve learned that, I think if we all supported each other we could resolve those problems.

This statement indicates that investigating and visually representing their communities aided learners’ analysis of such topics as community needs (see McIntyre, 2003).

Antonio summarized many of the aforementioned benefits when he said:

I'm thankful we've taken these pictures, something that perhaps helps us have more ideas. I also feel it helps me a lot because in every photo that's taken another idea comes and stays with me. And you learn more, to have more communication with others and also to know things that perhaps you haven't known. Through the photos you . . . also share and have love, as they say, for others, when we talk about the Word of God – to have love, not just for oneself.

Here, Antonio describes how taking photographs and sharing cameras helped spark intellectual stimulation, respectful communication, companionship, empathy, and love, virtues that also resonated with his religious faith.

Learners' reflections illustrate the creative, liberatory potential of photography: The project helped some participants to see their surroundings in a new light, to document important aspects of their lives and communities, to strengthen their visual literacy and communicative abilities, to overcome timidity, and to share memorable experiences with friends. If Alfalit had sufficient resources, the pictures could have supplied generative themes for a new literacy curriculum based not on predetermined themes, but on the features of local communities (see Barndt, 2001; Freire, 1973). Despite its limitations, the project helped activate and validate *campesinos/as*' 'subjugated knowledges', meaning 'a whole set of knowledges which have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated' (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). Put another way, the opportunity to visually represent oneself and one's world can foster social esteem and recognition.

## Discussion and implications

This case illustrates the countervailing potential and consequences of participatory photography. Some residents perceived photography as a technology of surveillance or criticized participants for taking pictures, leading them to monitor their own behavior. In such projects the inspecting gaze is multidirectional: participant-photographers are subject to others' gaze and commentaries; participants scrutinize photographic subjects; participants and community residents internalize the researcher's gaze; and researchers are observed by participants and local residents.

In this setting, suspicion was related to postwar fear and mistrust, beliefs about *hechicería*, and child kidnapping incidents and rumors, which in turn reflected US–Latin America relations and perceptions of *gringas*. Learners' *pena* demonstrated the internalization of the local 'reign of opinion' (Foucault, 1980) through the knowledge they were being watched. Because I viewed photography as a benign technology, I misjudged how it would be received in this setting. Nevertheless, taking photographs elicited *campesinos/as*' knowledge, enabling them to exercise some degree of power by choosing how to represent themselves, their lives, and their communities. This study, then, suggests participatory photography is a technology of power with potentially unintended consequences.

Moreover, participants' and local residents' responses to photography are mediated by the local setting, including cultural beliefs, historical events, social and gender relations (Williams & Lykes, 2003), and social norms. Where picture-taking and cameras are 'abnormal', taking photographs makes participants more visible – and vulnerable. Because internalized expectations are a powerful means of social control, researchers should explore with participants whether taking pictures would cause embarrassment and prepare them for potential criticism.

Just as participatory processes do not erase power differentials, giving cameras to participants does not preclude surveillance, invasion of privacy, or related problems. Where there is a history of political repression, surveillance, use of retaliation to settle conflicts, or betrayal by neighbors, cameras are more likely to evoke suspicion. Furthermore, the increased use of 'new surveillance' technologies (Simon, 2003) such as dataveillance and spyware increase the likelihood of suspicion toward cameras and photographers alike. Increasingly, we are also 'spying on ourselves' (Weiss, 2004), using camera and video phones both to expose abuse of power and invade privacy. Giving participants cameras, in other words, simultaneously democratizes knowledge production and surveillance (Weiss, 2004).

Researchers can use multiple strategies to navigate the risks and dilemmas of participatory photography, always tailoring them to local circumstances. Co-operative inquiry skills (Heron, 1996) such as practicing empathy and awareness of others, intuiting others' meanings, and responding with sensitivity to participants' emotional distress (see also Ewald, 2001) are especially important. Second, key informants can help identify potential problems and ensure that photography is suited to local norms; in turn, this information can help researchers anticipate how sociocultural factors might shape local responses to photography. Third, photography projects should begin with a discussion of power and ethics such as asking for permission to take photographs and handling the disclosure of embarrassing information (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Culturally appropriate ways of seeking permission and meaningful consent, however, differ across settings and may conflict with institutional review board (IRB) requirements (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006). As such, researchers should consider developing the IRB proposal and consent forms with participants (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006).

Additionally, it is important to discuss frequently participant concerns and ways to resolve emerging problems, which in turn requires an atmosphere of safety, inclusion, and freedom to express divergent opinions (Heron, 1996; McIntyre & Lykes, 2004). Role plays are a non-threatening way to negotiate the social interactions involved in taking pictures (e.g. asking for permission, responding to criticism) and to try out alternative actions (see Williams & Lykes, 2003). Finally, researchers should ask participants what kinds of support and guidance they need.

Participatory photography poses considerable risks, yet this case and the wider literature reveal it is also a promising way to elicit local knowledge, to reframe how individuals view themselves and their surroundings, to foster written and oral literacy, and to privilege the perspectives of groups who are often dismissed or



ignored. Understanding photography as a culturally embedded technology of power with potential for both social control and the recovery of subjugated knowledge can help ensure that participatory photography projects engender trust, learning, and action rather than suspicion or embarrassment.

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