PhotoVOICE 2.0: a brief overview
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PhotoVOICE 2.0 is an empirical research methodology which has been adapted and piloted by Dr Elisabet Le Roux and Dr Selina Palm in two research settings within Southern Africa. Full details on the methodology and its application is in the process of being drafted and published by them. This overview brief is offered in the meantime, due to the interest shown by other researchers, and the authors' support for having the methodology used more widely in safe and ethical ways.

1. Background

Photovoice was first designed and used by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris as a participatory research methodology that allows people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, promotes critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through discussion of the photographs, and reaches policy makers (Wang & Burris, 1997:369).[2]

This brief offers an overview of an adaptation of Photovoice used by the authors in two studies (one on-going at time of publication of this document) in Sub-Saharan Africa. The adaptation, called PhotoVOICE 2.0, is briefly explained here and is proposed as a useful and effective participatory method, especially in resource-constrained, low-literacy contexts. It enables a deeper and more textured qualitative investigation of highly sensitive topics, for example, violence against women.

With PhotoVOICE 2.0, community members are trained as research assistants (RAs) and empowered to both collect and analyse audiovisual data from within their own embedded situations. Using smartphones, they take photos within their everyday contexts that are relevant to the topic being studied, then share the photo virtually with the research lead, accompanied by a short oral voicenote. The voicenote briefly describes the photo, why it was taken, and what it means subjectively to the RA. This process continues for 4-6 months. At the endline workshop the RA is presented with all of their photos matched with their transcribed voicenotes, and proceeds to analyse it in a group process called Photoboarding.

The adaptation from standard Photovoice is in four key areas:
- The use of simple, accessible mobile technology (Whatsapp)
- The addition of voicenotes to each photo that record the collector's insights at the time
- Its use over a longer period of time enabling it to be embedded in everyday contexts
- The inclusion of Photoboarding (endline analysis process where RA's insights are centred)

This document offers a brief overview of some practicalities of using PhotoVOICE 2.0. Articles and reports that go into the details of the process, illustrating it with specific examples from where it has been used, are in the process of being designed/published. This document also does not explore how this type of research has been designed from the start to be survivor-centred and to become an ongoing tool for advocacy. Forthcoming articles and research reports will explore this area.

2. Why this adaptation?

The authors do research, globally, on violence against women and against children. The adaptation was created with the following needs in mind when conducting research on these sensitive topics:

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[2] Wang, C. & Burris, M.A. Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behaviour*, 14(3): 369-387.

- The importance of centralising those most affected by the issue being studied, as co-researchers and knowledge producers in the whole process.
- The reality that many of those who are most affected may speak local languages only and that some of the most vulnerable are only functionally literate or even illiterate
- The reality that funding for empirical research is limited, but there is an urgent need for longer-term qualitative research around patterns of violence and underlying social norms.

3. PhotoVOICE 2.0: What we did

PhotoVOICE 2.0 has four key steps:
- Training of local research assistants
- Data collection period (often four – six months)
- Endline analysis of data in-person with research assistants
- Analysis and integration by lead researchers

Training of research assistants

The benefit of this approach is that the various RAs can be situated in different locations. Only for the baseline training and endline analysis do they all need to be in the same place, and with the lead researchers.

Research assistants (RAs) are trained on a variety of practical issues:
- How does a smartphone and Whatsapp work (some may not used this application before; some may never have had a phone before)
- The art of storytelling through and alongside photos
- How to take photos and compile and record accompanying oral voicenotes
- How to ask permission to take photographs in safe and ethical ways
- Legal and ethical aspects in their setting

Because the RAs are taking photos over an extended period of time, and because of the sensitive nature of the focus of the studies, the RAs also receive training on the specific issue. The training offers them an enriched, and shared, understanding of the various drivers and issues relevant to the topic they will be photographing, which in turn leads to more nuanced photos and voicenotes.

In our study exploring campus rape culture, carried out at a South African university in 2020, six student RAs were trained at baseline to identify underlying social norms and understand gender-based violence and gender and sexuality constructs, and also received some training from a local professional photographer.

Data collection

Over an extended period (4-6 months) the RAs are based in their local home contexts and take photos there. These are shared in-time, using Whatsapp, and each photo is accompanied by a 30-second voicenote. Voicenotes can be in the language that the RA feels most comfortable with. The lead researcher replies in-time, acknowledging the submission and supporting the RA. Whatsapp also allows for continuous communication, support and input from the lead researcher and the rest of the research team, ensuring that RAs do not lose steam and continue to provide quality data.

Voicenotes:
- Each photo is accompanied by a 30-second voicenote, explaining the photo, why it was taken, and what it meant at the time to the RA

- Each RA shares their photos and voicenotes individually with the research lead, on a private Whatsapp group only. This ensures the safety and confidentiality of the data.
- Voicenotes are recorded in the research assistant's preferred language. If this language is not spoken by the lead researcher, a local interpreter forms part of the Whatsapp group, and adds the oral translation of the voicenote to the group chat.

Furthermore:
- A research groupchat is used to share monthly 3-minute video clips from the research lead, as encouragement and reminders of important or relevant issues (e.g. not to take a photo when facing the sun, or to remember to connect their photos to local social norms)
- It is important to provide airtime, so RAs can use Whatsapp
- Where needed, provide smartphones that can take photos.

Endline analysis

Throughout the data collection process, voicenotes are transcribed by the lead researcher. Before the endline analysis workshops, all photos and transcriptions are printed and matched together. During a 2-day analysis process at endline, each RA analyses her own photos in a process called Photoboarding. Photoboards are made by each RA by placing selected photos up on an A1-size cardboard and then presenting it to the others for discussion:

- With Photoboard 1, RAs are invited to review all their photos and then build a Photoboard that illustrates what they identify as the central theme of their photos. The theme is written at the top of the Photoboard and the photos that they feel reflect it best are included.
- With Photoboard 2, RAs are invited to use their photos to answer the main research question of the project. They are presented with lightly drawn concentric circles on their board. They can select any number of their photos, placing them along the concentric circles to indicate how relevant they feel the photo is to answering the main research question.
- With Photoboard 3, research assistants work with a second framework for analysing the data.

The different Photoboards help assist RAs to surface insights into what they see as core drivers or root causes and what are maybe identified by them as surface issues. This also highlights the interconnections between photos and allows other issues to emerge and be further discussed. Obviously the Photoboards can also be structured in other ways relevant to the particular topic being studied.

A Voicenote Board can also be created. Research assistants are asked to review all the voicenotes they sent, select the ones they think are strongest and most relevant, and build a Voicenote Board with it. They are also asked to write a heading for the Voicenote Board to indicate its main theme.

For example, with a study on violence against women and against children, the RAs were presented with a lightly drawn tree on cardboard. This is a 'violence tree,' explaining the fruit of the tree as actual practices and direct instances of violence, the trunk as the underpinning social norms leading to/supporting violence, and the roots as the underlying beliefs that lead to violence. With Photoboard 3, the RAs then reviewed their photos, selecting any and all that they think are relevant, and place them in different places on the tree.
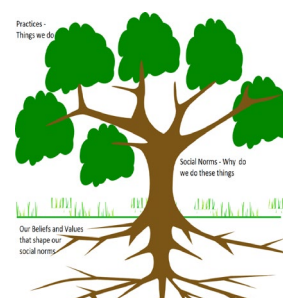
The Photoboarding process is accompanied by group discussion, where each RA explains the Board that they built and invited questions and feedback first from the other RAs and then the lead researcher. This is part of the analysis process. Notes should be taken of these discussions by the lead researcher and it can also be useful to have it recorded and transcribed as an added source of data.

Analysis and integration

A final level of analysis of the Photovoice material is then conducted by the lead researcher only. Each RA's photos, voicenotes and Photoboards are reviewed as a whole, identifying what they took photos of, what types of issues she focused most on, and the main overarching themes of the photos. The RAs' Photoboards and Voicenote Board are also analysed, and this is combined with the three photos that they selected as their favourites. A synthesis document is then written up for each RA, based on all these processes, summarising the RA's photos, emerging themes and overall focus.

4. Advantages of using PhotoVOICE 2.0

- It enables meaningful participation by individuals who are often excluded from the research process due to being illiterate, or local language speakers, or being based in rural areas
- It enables ethnographic research on sensitive issues, despite limited budgets and time constraints, and can provide rich, insider data, also within closed, hierarchical communities
- Adding voicenotes allows RAs to analyse the 'why' of what they are seeing at the time, allowing deeper and personal reflections on the drivers of discrimination and violence.
- From a research perspective it is very effective at surfacing unheard voices by working with insiders in the community who are trusted by those who may share their stories with them
- RAs collect and interpret data over 4-6 months, rather than just a short intensive period, which offers enough time for them to really think and reflect, and to make connections between the different things they are seeing surfacing in their own community.

5. Ethics

Taking photographs has legal and ethical implications for the photographer. The key thing is to consistently keep in mind the safety (physical and emotional) of those being photographed and also those taking the photographs. It is very important that country-specific laws pertaining to taking and use of photos fully informs the ethics process. Photos cannot be taken and used in research if they do not comply with the laws of the country. But most importantly, it is critical to keep the psychological welfare of everyone involved in mind throughout the entire process.

The following general principles apply:
- If the study focuses on a specific institution (e.g. a church denomination or a university), institutional permission must be attained in advance
- Where photos of people are taken, consent should be given. This can be verbal or written, depending on the legal and/or institutional ethical requirements

With research conducted in Zambia, local counsellors were identified in each of the three communities where the research was conducted, and RAs were referred to them if involvement in the research process surfaced issues that they needed support with (e.g. trauma). The counsellors were also available for community members to be referred to, although this support was never required. Furthermore, the Zambia project was embedded within a programmatic initiative that may have provided additional support and referral pathways for both RAs and those at community level.

- In the case of subjects younger than 18 years, consent is needed from both the subject and his/her parent or guardian
- Even if consent is given, it might at times be advisable to still blur faces within photo or even to not include a photo in dissemination activities if it is deemed sensitive or inappropriate
- Phones must be kept with research assistants at all times, or in a safe location where others cannot access it, and must not be lent to other people
- All phones have to be passcode protected at all times
- Research assistants should not share their photos with anyone except the research lead
- Ideally, ethical clearance for the project should be attained, so that the research plan and process is vetted by an external body, and so that the research team is held accountable.

During the baseline training, extensive time should be spent on explaining the ethical requirements of the research. RAs should then roleplay to practice explaining the research, explaining the informed consent form, and identifying whether certain situations will require informed consent.

At endline, a final ethical vetting process is also done with each photo, to decide whether it can be used in dissemination and, if so, in what way (e.g. by using face-blurring technology if needed):
- The researcher lead works with each RA, going through each photo. The context and circumstances of each photo is evaluated, to ensure that its subjects gave permission, and that confidentiality and anonymity have been respected. There may be some cases where a RA has permission to take a photo (e.g. of a child), but the decision is still taken not to use the photo during dissemination, or to blur the face.
- During the final analysis and integration step, the research lead again reviews each photo, making a final decision on whether it can be used for dissemination.

6. Where and how has it been used so far?

To date, this methodology has been used by Le Roux and Palm in Zambia, in a research project on religious institutions and violence against women and against children, and in South Africa, in a research project on campus rape culture at a university. This creative audio-visual and storytelling approach has enabled highly participatory research, where the insiders are co-researchers, offering unique access and insight into spaces that are often quite closed and resistant to outsiders. For us, this increasingly forms part of our feminist research toolkit, especially as the research process in itself bridges, and also often draws on, grassroots activism for social justice.

For more on these projects, the following sources are currently available:

- Webinar on the PhotoVOICE 2.0 methodology, presented by Elisabet le Roux and hosted by the *Performing Violence, Engendering Change: Developing Arts-Based Approaches to Peacebuilding* network on the 22nd of July 2020. Available at: https://www.performingviolence.com/webinars
- Le Roux, E. *Women experience oppression differently. Our response must be nuanced*. Available at: https://www.news24.com/news24/columnists/guestcolumn/women-experience-oppression-differently-our-response-must-be-nuanced-20190809
- Le Roux, E. 2019. Can religious women choose? Holding the tension between complicity and agency. *African Journal of Gender and Religion*, 25(1): 1-19. Available at: https://ajgr.uwc.ac.za/index.php/AJGR/article/download/2/3