

Using participatory photography to stimulate critical thinking: collaborative action-research in Australia and Tanzania

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Introduction and methodology

Do you see what I see? and *At Risk?* are the titles of the two Master's in Communication for Development theses that resulted from two independent participatory photography projects with the same methodology in order to allow a comparison of the results.

The initial idea was established in 2009 while Karen Marie Thulstrup was located in Usa River, Tanzania, and Cassandra Doyle was in Tennant Creek, Australia. Whilst situated in two geographically different locations, we quickly established that both countries shared a similar history of dispossession and oppression as a result of European colonization, and both locations certainly appeared to share similar levels of violence and poverty despite the disparity of the geographical places and the diversity of cultures. In particular, we pondered how a certain type of environment would affect youth and their decision-making ability. This in turn led to the development of the research question: "why do marginalized youth adopt risk-taking behaviors, which are known to have a damaging effect on their future?"

Our theses aimed to allow the reader to ascertain *who* the youth were and how traditional representational practices may affect *what* they would become. The intention of the participatory photography projects was to provide the chosen youth with tools to find a voice to share their previously marginalized lived experiences in order to create their own practice of representation and ways of knowing. As researchers, we wanted to understand how the youths' environments affected their decision-making ability, and thus their risk-taking behaviors, but also to use the opportunity as a means to stimulate critical reflection among the young participants. Ideally, they would be given the opportunity to acquire tools to

creatively explore and understand how their environment, identity and decision-making ability were linked.

Initially we had each hoped to attract two young men and two young women to provide an equal gender balance, and to ensure each group was small enough for us to conduct valid research, since we were novice researchers. The rationale for this choice of age group was that it allowed the focus to remain on a group of young people who were on the cusp of adulthood, allowing us to forge an understanding of the research question, while aiming to encourage an element of critical thinking and reflection from the youth as to whether they desired their future lives to involve risk-taking as a daily occurrence.

In fact, the *At Risk?* project attracted three young men and two young women between the ages of 13 and 20. *Do you see what I see* included knowledge produced by six young women and two young men, aged between 14 and 20, with not all of the participants producing photographs – some simply produced knowledge during the peer discussions, and not all stayed with the projects for the two months of their duration.

Both projects were carried out using the same process.

Following the introduction to each participant, the goals and aims of the project were explained to them and they were presented with consent forms and the opportunity to consider their involvement. Once the participants had agreed to the study, they were presented with cameras to take photos which they believed documented their environment in relation to the research question. Once the participants presented their chosen photographs (each participant selected a number of photographs and gave these photographs a title) a photo-interview was conducted using the photographs as entry points for discussions on risk-taking behaviour. Phase two saw the participants document their imagined desired futures. Once the field work ended, both researchers analyzed the field work process and the photographs produced in their present location before completing a comparison of the material produced both in Usa River, Tanzania and Tennant Creek, Australia.

Representation, identity and risk-taking behaviors

Based on the writings of Stuart Hall (2001), we established a theoretical framework with which to explore the interconnection between representation, identity and decision-making. Identities, according to Hall, are never transparent; rather, they are produced, in a process that is never complete. Furthermore, practices of representation of identities always implicate the positions from which one speaks or writes: “though we speak in our own name of ourselves, from our own experience nevertheless the one who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly, in the same place” (Hall, 2001).

In other words, the way in which the youth view or position themselves is never the same way in which they are positioned or viewed by others. An important factor is context, which refers to how the power and representation practices emerged throughout the colonization process have affected the construction of cultural Identity for the youth population of Usa River and Tennant Creek. Positioning refers to how the youth choose to position *or* represent themselves and their identity. Understanding the way the youth are viewed through traditional representational practices and the way in which they view themselves as a result of colonization processes is essential to gaining insight into their lived experiences and, in relation to our research question, to understanding the effects on their decision-making practices.

The idea behind our projects, based on this framework, was to conduct an inclusive process, which would consist of a subject-subject relationship and aim to motivate critical thinking, awareness and reflection among the young participants. Those tools might in turn assist them in overcoming social circumstances that have led them to adopt excessive risk-taking behaviors – if indeed they deemed their risk-taking excessive.

Why participatory photography?

Much has been written about the need to generate alternative ways of knowing rather than relying on traditional Western tools, which are based upon empirical observation and critical reflection. Our research methods were based on the work of Singhal (2006) who states that what isn't coded in print is usually repressed, disqualified, and dismissed. These forms of Western empirical investigation are extremely relevant when formulating academic research to be shared between peers. However, we were looking for a common language with which to generate knowledge that could easily be shared locally in Tanzania and Australia as well as in Sweden, and that would also be suited to the age of the participants.

We chose the use of the visual to become the language, or the vernacular, with which the participants would share their lived experiences. Maintaining a participatory focus was essential to us as researchers, and therefore we decided to work with a participatory photography project. We believed that working with a visual medium as a language would hopefully breakdown cultural and language barriers that existed: "In essence, by placing cameras in the hands of people, a facilitator or researcher can gain insights into people's lived experiences, which were previously overlooked, rejected, or silenced. The photograph's narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, community discussion, and action" (Singhal, 2004). Photographs are powerful tools for eliciting knowledge on many levels. Byron Harvey successfully used indigenous art-work in an ethnographical context in order to offer his informants a positive scheme which would allow for a very involved explanation using the simplest vocabulary (Collier 1986). Drawing on Harvey's work, we believed that in our case photography as an art form would allow for feedback of specific nature and context, which was reflective of the life experiences of the participants. This belief is supported by Collier (1986) who states that the impact of photographs in interviewing is in response to imagery reflective of the life experience of the informant'.

The photo-interviews were a technique that we hoped would elicit first person and peer group narratives that put the means of representation in young people's own hands (Back, Cohen & Keith 1998). This proved to be true for both projects. Finding instruments that young people were able to feel comfortable with, in order to construct their own representational practices, we believed, were essential to the success or failure of the projects. The 'Finding their way home project' (1999) also describes the use of modes of representation in order to allow the informants to contribute insights that may otherwise have been ignored. The combination of face-to-face interviews, photography and the photo-interview/storytelling had varying success for each of the participants.

The photo-interviews enabled the youth to create their own form of representation, which was evidenced not by the photographs alone, but also through the dialogue that was subsequently produced. The effects of the participants' circumstances became evident through their dialogue. How their childhood experiences, their learning, their seeing and their environment affected their decision-making ability in terms of risk-taking behaviors could not have been interpreted from the visual images alone. It was through the *flow of stories* and other commentary, which ensued, that the youth could use this new language (of visual images) to share their lived experiences and produce rich, meaningful data.

Consistent with Byron Harvey's form of research, our participatory photography projects allowed the participants three opportunities to deliver and build on their shared knowledge. Firstly, through the images themselves, which stood alone as a document of an experience, of a moment captured in their lives. Secondly, through the dialogue conducted in the photo-interview, which allowed the participants to build on this and explain what they meant by their photographs, and how they related to their risk-taking behavior. Thirdly, through the use of 'imagery' when constructing visual representations of their ideal future. This allowed for a new level of critical thinking to be

adopted by the participants, who then reflected upon how to adapt their risk-taking behaviors.

Participant observation became a larger part of our fieldwork process than initially expected. Firstly, it gave us the means to establish a level of trust that was required to form a genuine functioning relationship with the young men and women participating. Secondly, it allowed for an increased level of knowledge regarding how the youth interact with each other, how they relate to daily life, and how they wish to be perceived by those who view them. While observation of the participants' daily life may have influenced the focus of the reported outcomes, we propose that without this time spent observing, the inhibitions of the participants would have surely impeded the rich flow of dialogue that occurred during the photo-interviews.

Collaboration

Both researchers exchanged thoughts, ideas and experiences throughout the field work process, giving each other advice about different approaches and strategies when working with participants. This was rewarding, as it allowed us to articulate possible difficulties and dilemmas along with sharing positive experiences. When implementing a participatory approach, a researcher must to some degree let go of control, while at the same time try to sustain a focus. This proved challenging and demanding, and having each other as trusted affiliates throughout that process was crucial. It produced a profound understanding of what it means to be able to navigate in the context where one is working, adding an extra dimension and allowing us to become more aware of our roles and responsibilities as researchers.

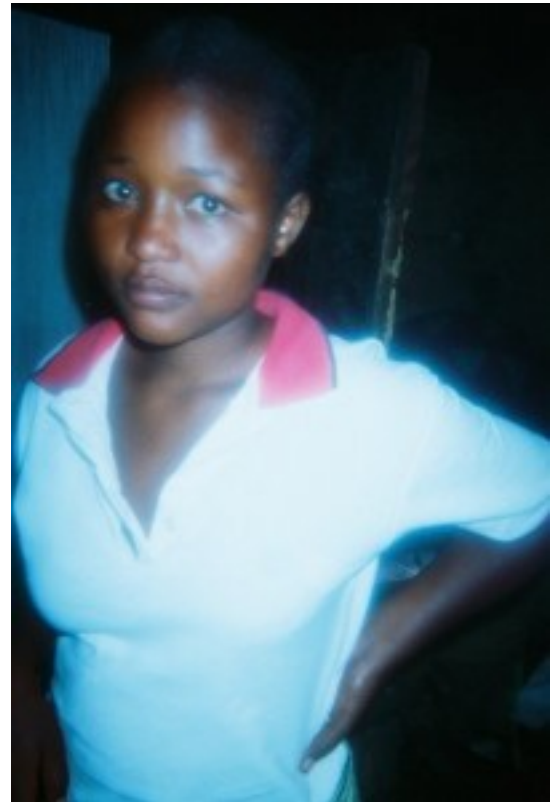
When we finally completed a comparison of the photographs, it revealed interesting similarities and differences between the youth in Usa River and Tennant Creek and how they made use of the visual to convey information about their adoption of risk-

taking behavior. The participants in Usa River adopted the camera as a thinking device, exploring their identity, their surroundings and their future. The young people in Tennant Creek implemented somewhat the same approach, utilizing the photographs to reflect upon themselves and their existence in the world:



"Don't

fight with your family, or you'll feel like this." Iesha, 16, Tennant Creek, AU



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Collier, who was considered a pioneer in visual anthropology, introduced the notion of feedback, which captured the way Iesha and Eva utilized their photographs. Feedback, Collier defined as follows: "What is feedback? It is an essential personal process, continually in progress, when blocked its absence can provoke serious psychological consequences" (Collier, 1986) and furthermore he stated: "Feedback can stimulate people to express multiple feelings about themselves and their culture. We can feed cultural material back to informants, allowing them to express their life feelings, or we can get the people to express themselves by manufacturing their own feedback, in paintings, drawings, storytelling, reenacting their lives for us, dramatically, or even producing their own photographic or motion images

with the camera. (Ibid). In other words, feedback is a way of stimulating a process of self-reflection, which is vital for human beings in the process of accumulating and responding to their existence in the world.

Iesha and Eva used the above photographs as material to stimulate the process of feedback, expressing feelings about themselves and their existence in the world – exploring their identities. While they used the images in a similar way, the feelings they expressed were quite different. Iesha chose to represent herself in the context of unhappiness; she was angry and sad following an argument with a family member. Her caption: ‘Don’t fight with your family, or you’ll feel like this’, shows that Iesha tried to position herself and her views within the image by using the term ‘feel’ rather than ‘look’. While an outsider viewing the photograph may interpret that Iesha is sad, or possibly angry, it is in the caption that the strength of the photo is increased. The use of this visual image in combination with the caption allowed Iesha to make visible an understanding of her lived experience –fighting, which had caused her anger and sadness.

Eva, on the other hand, was somewhat more experimental in her use of the visual, which she employed to confirm a presumption of her own – that she is different when she drinks alcohol. What is similar with Iesha’s photograph is how Eva’s portrait also increases in strength once interpreted in conjunction with the caption. It becomes evident how Eva has challenged herself by asking a question about her behavior in relation to risk-taking. She also questions how others might view her. Furthermore, she exposes what one could assume is insecurity when she has been drinking alcohol: ”I talk more, when I have taken alcohol – also nonsense.” Rather than protecting her vulnerability, she has chosen to explore it through both the photograph and her narration. Indeed, both girls were bold and confident in the way they utilized the visual tool and in the way they approached and

completed the task, which was to ‘Illustrate their environment visually’.

Confronting risk-taking behavior

When addressing the question of underlying causes for engaging in risk-taking behavior, a distinct parallel was identified between the following account from Usa River and the photograph and caption from Tennant Creek shown below: “If you take pombe [alcohol] and smoke, if you are a father of the house or youth, you can’t do anything. If you are the father of the house and drink you can beat your children without any reason. It affects the youth so they take pombe and grow up and become bad people.” (Neema, 17, Usa River, TZ)



”If you do it, the children will do it. This is my cousin she is ‘horrors’.” Iesha, 16,
Tennant Creek, AU

Cassandra, knowing the local lingo, elaborated on the term ‘horrors’: ”The term ‘horrors’ is used to describe someone who has consumed excessive amounts of alcohol and/or drugs. This term is associated with other risk-taking behaviours such as fighting, hallucinating or self-harming behaviours etc. There is always an element of shame or danger associated when that term is used to described someone.”

The parallel identified between the first statement from Usa River, TZ and the following picture and caption from Tennant Creek, AU above relates to role modeling, and confirms how young people's actions are directed by what they witness in their immediate surroundings. In both examples, parents were emphasized as primary role models. This testifies of a certain pattern present when addressing the issue of risk-taking behavior. Iesha, who had taken the photograph above, put it very simply: "If you do it, the children will do it..."

Furthermore, when we asked the participants to imagine their ideal future visually during the second photo session, we found that positive role models provided hope for participants. Positive role models proved to offer critical perspectives relating to the participants' decision-making and thereby provoked intentions of and actions towards change.

A further exploration of the complex patterns of risk-taking behavior revealed lack of stimulation as a cause. This became clear from the following caption from Tennant Creek, Australia: "He's bored, so he smokes" (Kyan, 16, Tennant Creek, AU).

Furthermore during the second photo session, education, work and opportunities were recognized as alternatives to risk-taking behavior both in Usa River, TZ and in Tennant Creek, AU, as these activities are stimulating. A final indicator that the participants in Usa River were lacking stimulation was the fact that even though they got three days to complete their first roll of film, all finished within 24 hours.

Concluding remarks

Globalization in itself has allowed for the conception of this collaborative project – without which it never would have occurred. Globalization has brought with it technology which has enabled persons in remote communities to enhance their knowledge of visual images, and an opportunity for people to shape the way they share knowledge about themselves. The availability of mobile phones with photographic and video

capabilities has for example changed the understanding of digital photography for those participants in Tennant Creek. The existence of the World Wide Web is another opportunity to increase Indigenous voices both locally and globally. While this in itself has not necessarily created change, it has the ability to increase cross-cultural understandings, and therefore, to act as a catalyst for change.

This is not to say that providing youth with positive images they can relate to will dispel the effects of their circumstances and environment; protect youth from witnessing and experiencing violence; being exposed to high level of alcohol and other drug use, or provide youth with positive role models. Unfortunately these issues are all common both in Tennant Creek, Australia and in Usa River, Tanzania. What the researchers propose based on this collaborative effort is that by providing youth with the tools to tell their story; by instigating a 'beginning' for youth to narrate their stories, will in turn provide them with an ability to make choices to facilitate their own change.

During the evaluation of the field work process, one participant in Usa River answered the following when the group was asked if they viewed their life differently than before the project:

"This project has helped me because I was taking a lot of marijuana, smoking a lot. But now I have learnt something, maybe I can try myself to reduce". The same participant said: "This project it helped to change our minds and feelings". (Yohanna, 20, Usa River, TZ)

The above statement testifies of how the participants and researchers were able to adopt a critical reflection by utilizing the visual as expressed by Singhal's take on Paulo Freire's ideas: "Freire strongly believed that visuals and photos, especially if they were taken by the people themselves, could play a key role in helping them reflect on their own lived experiences, in clarifying and articulating their discontent, and in framing their ideas for action" (Singhal, 2004).

Providing choices for change requires choices, which are limited in socio and economically burdened communities like Tennant Creek and Usa River. Further research is required to counteract these limitations. Empowerment through culturally sensitive programs that provide stronger Cultural Identity for the youth to express and ultimately represent themselves will however assist in reducing risk-taking behaviors.

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