

Differentiating Practices of Participatory Visual Media Production

Richard Chalfen

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades and across the world, a range of ‘participatory visual methods’ has caught the imagination of people seeking to investigate social conditions, lived experience, subjective viewpoints and, in some cases, interventions for social action. By using the term ‘participatory visual methods’, attention is drawn to collaborations of participants (sometimes research ‘subjects’) and researchers in the production of pictorial expression of personal thoughts and life circumstances. Though seldom defined or codified, the process often brings together an unfamiliar ‘outside’ person(s) and an individual or group of ‘inside’ people to explore a phenomenon by collaborating on the production of visual (often audio-visual) documentation. The design of these collaborations between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘outsiders’ (for example, researchers, educators, artists, professional photographers) may vary widely. However, there is a general sense that ordinary

people will welcome the opportunity to express themselves by collaborating in the production of visual data for exhibition, new observation and comment or academic study. The current diversity found in professional and non-professional approaches is both impressive and worthy of some clarification.

The majority of accounts in this domain of research methods refer to people using camera technology for the first time, but other relevant examples center on non-camera means of pictorial representation such as drawing, sketching or otherwise illustrating their ideas.¹ This review will favor the former: namely, when some form of camera technology has been used to generate data. I stress the inclusion of projects motivated by a simple (sometimes naïve) sense of curiosity (‘How does the world look to X group of young people?’ or ‘How does this person, so unlike us, see the same things we do?’) as well as formally organized, IRB (Institutional Review Board)-sanctioned research projects.² Research is broadly conceptualized as fieldwork undertaken in domestic

and international venues, in home, neighborhood and community.

One frequently heard justification for offering cameras to individuals and groups is to ‘give them a voice’.³ Motivations and intentions can include providing a new channel of expression, seeing and acknowledging another’s point of view, learning what others see as part of everyday life and providing an artistic context for personal expression, among others. Authors frequently cite the need to work with under-represented, disenfranchised sectors of the population. Metaphorically and literally, this represents an intellectual project as well as a humanistic and even noble calling, when the objective is ‘to reduce discrimination, marginalization and inequality and increase empowerment’ (personal communication, Jon Prosser, 2002). But we will see that projects have different end points, and that results are valued in different ways. This chapter offers an overview of this domain of visual methods research. The term ‘participant visual methods’ covers a lot of ground and requires some insight into how various sub-categories of activity are related to one another.

REFERENCE POINT: BIO-DOCUMENTARY NARRATIVES

One principal objective of participatory media research is to eliminate the conceptual and practical filters (literal and metaphorically speaking) that professional filmmakers put in place when gaining access to the lives of certain groups of people and to certain activities. The need arises to ‘see through’ these filters and lenses in an effort to gain access to more authentic views – fully realizing that complete ‘unobstructed views’ are impossible. However, the filters that naïve image-makers put in place are amenable to scrutiny and study.

Within this objective, one convenient reference point for the following collection of work is the notion of ‘bio-documentary filmmaking’

introduced and developed by communication scholar Sol Worth (1922–1977).⁴ The relevance of this term is seen in the following definition:

A Bio-Documentary film is a film made by a person to show how he [sic] feels about himself [sic] and his [sic] world. It is a subjective way of showing what the objective world that a person sees is ‘really’ like. In part, this kind of film bears the same relation of a documentary film that a self-portrait has to a portrait or a [biography to an] autobiography. In addition, because of the specific way that this kind of film is made, it often captures feelings and reveals values, attitudes, and concerns that lie beyond conscious control of the maker (Worth and Adair, 1972: 25).⁵

For purposes of this chapter, I am enlarging this cover term and general category to include other media: namely, still photography (‘bio-documentary photography’)⁶ and videotape (‘bio-documentary video’). Creating a more inclusive category reduces attention to the specific medium and enhances consideration of personal visual communication.

I am not claiming that all projects under review conform to all of Worth’s criteria; important variables associated with this practice and process are outlined below and discussed more thoroughly later in the chapter. However I am drawing on a general principle suggested by Worth and others that results of camera use by non-professionals, ordinary people untrained in the visual arts, can inform interested observers and contribute a source of information and knowledge not obtainable in any other way. For instance, I am not insisting that members of subject groups remain naïve in photographic techniques or, in contrast, become skilled photographers, while using their cameras. This becomes an interesting independent variable; we will see that many projects include the participation of professional photographers and artists. However the fact that ordinary people themselves are doing the camerawork, using cameras, and producing their own images remains paramount.

What is left most open is how the results of these projects are treated: i.e. displayed, described, studied, analyzed, written about or

otherwise valued. This diversity may, in fact, be most responsible for an observed lack of cross-referencing or continuity across the full range of these projects, inhibiting any comprehensive sense of accumulated knowledge and tradition. This chapter is, in part, one attempt to redirect this trend and counteract this unproductive trajectory.

BACKGROUND

I find that distinctions between ‘collaborative media’ and ‘participant media’ are quite instructive. Agreeing with Mitchell and de Lange:

Video has been used in various ways in social science research, and a distinction between collaborative video overlapping with participatory video, is necessary. Marcus Banks (2001), Sarah Pink (2001) and others refer to *collaborative video* as a process where the researcher or community worker works with a group of participants to create a video production, while in *participatory video*, the process involves a group of participants primarily constructing their own video texts with only minimal assistance from the research team (Mitchell and de Lange, Chapter 9; my italics).

Most examples of collaborative media center on the ways that interested parties enter into a cooperative scheme in the image-making process and how different tasks are shared to produce a series of photographs, a film or a videotape. A visiting researcher, social activist or filmmaker can request cooperation in different ways – these may include:

- Asking for help from local people by having them appear on-camera for a pre-planned theme, storyline, etc. (see Film: Flaherty, 1922).
- Asking different members of the community to say what they want included and why they want certain subject matter filmed; more often than not, community members propose a selection of subject matter for purposes of local improvement in physical, social or political conditions (Kennedy, 1971, 1982; Elder, 1995).
- Asking for local people to collaborate in editing or otherwise organizing a film; this may also entail asking for preferred meanings of particular

visual sequences and overall meaning of a film (Asch et al., 1991; MacDougall, 1992).

Importantly, these categories are not mutually exclusive as any one may include several forms of cooperation (Chalfen, 1997).

SUB-CATEGORIES AND INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS

Another fundamental distinction within participant media and related counterparts lies in stipulating who is actually using the camera. This dramatic difference in model of cooperation occurs when a researcher or filmmaker makes a selection of local people living in a particular community to make their own films. Variations of participant media include auto-photographic method (Ziller, 1990), hermeneutic photography (Hagedorn, 1994, 1996), visual narratives (Rich and Chalfen, 1999; Rich et al., 2005), visual/digital storytelling (Lambert, 2009), pictorial diaries (Meth, 2003; Holliday, 2004), bio-documentary film (Worth, 1966), socio-documentary film (Chalfen and Haley, 1971; Chalfen, 1981, 1992), ‘participative video’ (Prosser and Loxley, 2008), ‘auto-driving’ (Clark, 1999) and photo/video therapy (Furman, 1990; Weiser, 1999) among others. These efforts are occasionally referred to as subject-generated images or as one form of ‘indigenous media’ and may be developed as applied work (Pink, 2007) or ‘participatory action research’ (PAR).

All participatory models are not aimed at just *what* members of a local community simply want to show in audio-visual formats, but the frame of inquiry also includes *how* they want to construct their ideas in mediated forms. Thus, a central aim of the participatory visual media process is to create pictorial narratives that convey what respondents want to communicate in the manner they wish to communicate. The common denominator centers on an individual or small group of people using borrowed cameras to produce

their own visual texts following their own incentives, ideas, concerns and objectives and local conditions.

SUGGESTED ORGANIZATION – TWO STRANDS OF WORK

I suggest a broad division of work in participatory media production based on two streams of activity and contribution, each of which can be instructive to the other. The first strand has attracted human interest commentary, and is made visible to the public in diverse forms of mass media, including articles in newspapers, well-illustrated books, clips on television and now spots appearing on websites, blogs, YouTube and the like. One example even drew Academy Award attention (the feature documentary film *Born into Brothels* (2004), see: <http://www.kids-with-cameras.org/bornintobrothels/> Accessed: 5 August 2010). Many projects in this strand spring from local problems and are organized by individual initiatives on behalf of caring and concerned individuals. These are often local efforts, supported with local funds or domestic private organizations or, on rare occasions, international grants. Picture-making projects mentioned in these reports have been directed by a diverse set of practitioners, including artists, social workers, photography instructors and community workers, among others.

Informal projects in the first strand have taken some inspiration and guidelines from the academic examples in conjunction with the successful and immensely popular emergence of consumer models of still and motion picture cameras. While we recognize that recent developments in digitalization have played a large role, we must also acknowledge that popular use of pre-digital instamatics, instant cameras (for example, Polaroids) and disposable (one-use or throw-away) cameras were also significant in this democratization process. As just one example, we find a range of projects directed toward

knowing more about the lives of children and young people. These include *Fotokids*, started by Nancy McGirr in 1991; *Kids with Cameras*, founded by Zana Briski in 2002; *Shooting Back*, created by Jim Hubbard in 1989; *Visible Voice* projects, started by Vincent O'Brien, 2002–06; the *Eye-to-Eye Project/Save the Children* (UK) and *Literacy and Photography*, established by Wendy Ewald (1985), among others.

The second strand is characterized more by formal models of research that are undertaken in academic contexts of fieldwork and publication. Thus, results are much less known to the public. This strand features results and findings that are published in professional journals and offer other perspectives from the more prevalent human-interest documentation. Work here is derived from institutional settings, grounded in academic interests and motivations, and rewards. These efforts are characterized by formal research proposals with sections devoted to background literature, hypothesis or set of expected outcomes, research protocols and detailed division of labor, and are aimed at funding from government agencies and foundations, sanctioned by an IRB submission and approval to safeguard ethical concerns, privacy issues and human protection, and the like.

Work in the second strand has a rich history found in many international examples of fieldwork done by visual anthropologists and visual sociologists, in projects that have asked members of different social groups to create their own images for research questions. Early and frequently cited examples include the 1966 project with the Navajo (Worth and Adair, 1972), the Inuit (Kennedy, 1982) as well as groups living in East Africa (Bellman and Jules-Rosette, 1977), Australia (Michaels, 1985), South America (Carelli, 1988; Asch et al., 1991; Turner, 1991) and Aibel's follow-up with the Navajo working with their own video equipment (Aibel, 1976).

These two stands of work can also be thought of as *projects* and *studies*. This characteristic difference focuses on different

values of respective 'end points' as well as the status and meaning of 'results' and 'findings'. Briefly, the 'project strand' is likely to privilege the visual products of image production as 'the results' and to celebrate them in exhibitions, screenings, award-giving contests and the like. Work that comprise the second 'studies strand' treats the photographic/video results as a 'mid-point' in the knowledge-production process; these resultant images become the focus of description and analysis to produce a set of findings that then serve as 'end points'. The significance of this difference will become clearer in the following pages.

KINDS OF QUESTIONS BEING ASKED

The many examples of projects and studies in participatory media research reviewed for this chapter are united by certain kinds of curiosity, questions, problems and solutions. General and specific questions that span the two strands of work cited above include the following:

- 1 'What does life look like as...' or 'What is it like to live as...'
 - a person living in slum or street conditions (Mizen, 2005), a shelter, as a gang member
 - someone at the 'bottom of the pyramid', such as homeless people (Radley et al., 2005; Packard, 2008)
 - a member of a persecuted political party or religious group and possibly compared to members of other competing groups (Lykes, 2001)
 - a person living with a chronic or terminal illness (Rich and Chalfen, 1999; Buchbinder et al., 2005; Lopez et al., 2005), with HIV (Dobnik, 2005; Elber, 2008), as an alcoholic or drug-addicted person (Evans et al., 1979), as someone confined to a wheelchair (Berland, 2007)
 - a survivor of a harmful medical episode, for example, a stroke or related brain trauma and damage (Lorenz, 2006)
 - a survivor of a human-made or natural disaster (Varoli, 2005)

- 2 How does the structure of a visual sequence, a visual narrative in film or video correspond to structures found in written or spoken expression, as in storytelling, myths, fables and related models of linguistic expression? (Worth and Adair, 1972).
- 3 How can these models of indigenous photography become a stimulus to memory (Radley and Taylor, 2003) or other modes of expression and/or channels of communication: for example, literacy, writing and public speaking?
- 4 How does the structure of the process, the making of a visual narrative, reflect or reveal the social structure or social organization of its producers? (Chalfen, 1981).
- 5 How successful is a visual narrative at revealing information that cannot be reported in any other mode of expression – How are naïve views and perspectives revealed through participatory visual methods?
- 6 How can first-time camerawork serve political ends: for example, to reveal and begin to change harmful antisocial conditions or even subversive activities? (Wang et al. 1996; Wang and Burris, 1997).

These questions are indicative of common interests, but they are not offered as an exhaustive inventory from a rapidly growing literature featuring participatory research methods.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL MODELS OF INQUIRY

Methodological decisions about research design and picture-making protocols depend largely on particular questions being asked, questions that motivate each project in conjunction with who is being asked to use cameras. Participatory visual methods encompass a range of 'projects' accompanied by different means of observation that ask people to show interested observers how and what they see as important aspects of their lives. In different models, the outside agent takes on the role of a project director (PD) usually for informal projects, or principal investigator (PI) for more academic formal ones. Again we can locate some variation; both models

contain variants based on different ways the PD or PI may elect to intervene. Three categories of independent variables are most common, comprising:

- The PD/PI may want to offer varying amounts of *technological and/or aesthetic instruction for camera use* (shooting strategy, camera technique) or editing (shot juxtaposition, sequencing) following different cinematic traditions.
- In other cases, the PD/PI may want to *question the filmmakers at different points* in the image-making process, gaining additional perspective on objectives, strategy and anticipated outcomes.
- In yet other examples, the PD/PI may want to *feed back* the visual results to community members to elicit additional information by learning more about locally realized meanings, interpretations and results.

Variations and additional complexity will be reviewed shortly.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL VARIATION

When surveying the accumulation of participatory media projects and studies, we clearly find a broad diversity of social and physical contexts, a range of work based on differing objectives, subjects, motives and intended outcomes going in several directions. Some projects are grounded in contexts of experimentation and research, some emphasizing quantitative measures, others, qualitative ones, and with varying degrees of rigor or academic discipline. Many reports have proved to be very vague on these latter variables. In conjunction, incentives and rewards have varied, the breadth of participants has broadened and results have been valued in different ways and advertised in alternative formats and venues. The general method is very versatile but, due to these varying contexts, comparing results of these projects is difficult and, indeed, problematic. Significant variables in participatory media research, all

bordering on methodology, include the following:

1. *Sponsorship varies*; the range of financial support extends from popular forms of individual and community-sponsored projects to more ambitious projects that require some form of private foundation and/or government funding.⁷
2. As suggested above, *different kinds of equipment* have been introduced – from 8mm, Super-8 and even 16mm technology, to instant cameras, e.g. Polaroids, to ‘point-and-shoot’ cameras, to one-use or disposable cameras, to videocams, to newer digital technologies, in both still and motion picture formats. In turn, we can predict the development of camera-phone projects.
3. Projects have been conducted with considerable *pedagogical variation* and protocols. This variation has ranged from a heavy hands-on approach, when projects included aesthetic information from professional photographers and some artists to enhance ‘good’ pictures; in these cases, participation included a professional photojournalist, fine artist, commercial photographer, or documentary filmmaker or feature film producer.⁸ As just one example: ‘[T]he 14 students ages 10 to 16, ... We talked them through the photo shoot and about composition and then gave them a camera...’ (Gonser, 2005). In contrast, other projects have remained closer to the bio-documentary preference for minimal instruction, by teaching just technology, avoiding any preferred choice of content or style, technique and the like, purposefully refraining from any aesthetic instruction beyond basic camera mechanics.⁹ In one project with Nepali women, we read: ‘She gave each subject a camera, showed them how to use the viewfinder and the flash. She then asked them to photograph things that were important to them and things that they thought Americans did not understand about their lives’ (Anonymous, n.d.).¹⁰
4. The range of assignments to research subjects varied in important ways. In order to understand the results of these projects, it is

important to have some information on first, how the student-subjects received their training and how they were introduced to photography and, secondly, on what they were asked to do. Differences were found in the degree of direction and assigned picture-taking. There was always some form of assignment; asking the student 'to take whatever they wanted' still counts as a form of assignment. But the other extreme would be the actual assignment of specific topics and perspectives. In one example, for a project with both Palestinian and Israeli children, the instructor made several recommendations: 'Not dramas, just little documentaries about who they are and what they believe in, who their parents are, where they go to school, what they had to eat, what movies they watch, what CDs they listen to' (Anonymous, 2005b).

5. Variation was also found when research participants were given *freedom to select their own image content*. The majority of projects professed a strong interest in learning what different people saw, admitting a bio-documentary curiosity. One approach was to encourage freedom of choice – freedom to select content, topics, settings for their pictures. Of course, this premise raises interesting questions – Is it ever possible to photograph anything and/or everything? A revealing example came from Iraq: 'In Herat, Rerras's students – mostly 14 to 18 years old – were restricted to taking pictures at the girls' school they attended, or at home, although some ventured out with their cameras while wearing burkas. In Kabul, the girls could wander a bit farther, searching for subjects for their photos' (Barisic, 2004). In another example dealing with abused Canadian immigrant women: 'Mehta gave the children the cameras and the freedom to ask their parents tough questions because she wanted to show that kids suffer almost as much as the abused spouse' (MacDonald, 2005). At the other extreme, we approach more of the strategy suggested by Worth's bio-documentary model, asking young people to decide, without collusion or coercion by personnel, as

part of a desire to learn what and how a specific group of people decide for themselves, what and how they prefer to look and see with their cameras. Interestingly, this ideal is never reached. (Eckholm, 2005).

6. Many projects stressed the importance of incorporating some form or *subject feedback and photo-elicitation* as a methodological component (Collier and Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). Both visual anthropologists and visual sociologists have gained important information by using participant-made images to ask for comments, insights and even questions in narratives that were obtained from subjects who had been given cameras to record their lives (Venkateswar, 2005). In these ways, we find a kind of double bio-documentary function, as they stimulate additional thought and comment from the same subject group. In one project involving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, we read: 'Twelve children from each side of the conflict took pictures of the Old City and offered their perspective on the ongoing conflict. After all the photos were taken they met to discuss their work and points of view. The hope being a lasting understanding of one another' (Sommer, 2007).

7. *Methods of study and analysis* varied greatly. These ranged from anecdotal comments and observations of participants' photographs to systematic gathering of pictures as data, to using an orderly and explicit analytical approach to visual results, requiring an explicit model of orderly annotation, logging and coding, content analysis, and sometimes, the use of qualitative analysis software (Rich and Patashnick, 2002). In many cases, however, reports never describe how the pictures are actually looked at or how certain observations were made about the results, leaving it to the viewer, suggesting the problematic stance of 'pictures-speak-for-themselves'.

8. Parallel to the variation noted for project 'inputs', we need to consider potential *variation in 'output'*. We are thus drawn to ask about the uses of tangible results and who might be the benefactors of such results.

What happened after the pictures were successfully taken – in addition to learning how they were treated, for example, examined, studied and analyzed – we are asking about if and how they were exhibited, sold, given back to original photographers and used for new projects, among many other possibilities.

The two strands of participatory media research differed in process, meaning that different emphases were put on ‘front ends’ vs ‘back ends’ of the process. Projects emphasized the making and display of images; in comparison, studies attended to post-production, post-display components of the overall process, including description, analysis and reporting results and findings. In the former, I found more variation, including local display and/or public exhibition, often associated with raising funds for additional projects. In the latter and at the other extreme, pictorial results of the research process were treated as private research data, as personal documents, and not for public viewing. Such results become part of academia, as published reports, articles and even books.

Clearly, the most commonly reported results in the project strand mentioned the development of *some kind of public exhibition*, some way of displaying the project’s pictures, but also in formats that were not limited to gallery walls, including films, CDs, slide shows, photo-essays, among other photographic products such as catalogs and a ‘Through My Eyes’ Calendar’ (Ziu, 2005). On occasion, the function of an exhibition is linked to art therapy, as mentioned above, when the photography workshop for the children of Beslan ‘turned into an extraordinary period of rehabilitation and rejuvenation... . It was at this point that it ceased to be simply a photography workshop and became a profound form of therapy’ (Varoli, 2005).

9. The two strands are also differentiated by what is first considered, and secondly done, with ‘*results*’ and ‘*findings*’. In the majority of ‘projects’ the visual/pictorial results are thought to stand on their own; they are meant

to be appreciated for themselves as achievements of people expressing themselves through visual media. In short, the results are not treated as findings. However, there are rare and interesting exceptions. One such example was provided in a report on Wendy Ewald’s work:¹¹ Ewald found that, ‘Mexican children were most interested in photographing dream images that were very playful [and they rarely photographed their families]. But in South Africa, the children didn’t want to make photos of their dreams. They preferred family portraits and taking pictures of their daily lives’ (Hayes and Rader, 2006). Another rare example was provided by Meikle and Whalen (2005), when one student stated: ‘Doing the project has made me much more confident about having my photo taken’. The project directors reported: ‘Girls were more interested in the project than boys, perhaps because teenage girls are a lot more image-conscious than boys at that age... . In the process, their self-esteem and confidence have improved dramatically’ (Meikle and Whalen, 2005).

Virtually by definition, academic studies comprising the second strand were required to go beyond pictorial results into interpretations and statements of findings. The scientific discourse that validates work in the studies strand is not accomplished in pictures; the medium of communication is writing, as we see that written texts are supported by visual ones. The inverse is true of most work in the projects strand – the images are supported with words when they are requested, as when the project is reported upon by interested writers.

10. Finally, there is considerable variation regarding any sense of intended *application of results*. For instance, who benefits from such picture-taking – people doing the photography or people looking at the results, neither or, more likely, both? The range is indeed quite impressive but seldom acknowledged or summarized. Many projects implied beneficial change (social improvements,

improved health care and/or education, a more balanced political control, human rights, among others) for participants (often, children and young people), community members, neighborhoods and the like.

Examples included gaining financial support for worthy causes such as improved healthcare facilities, better recreational services or public understanding of a social problem or what professionals are dealing with on an everyday basis. In one medically-related project that asked 'medically fragile children' to photographically illustrate their lives, project director Jennifer Swanberg said she hoped the pictures would help medical professionals remember that the children have lives and needs outside of those tied to their conditions (Meehan, 2005). In the context of medically-related studies, results and findings are being incorporated into medical school curricula (Chalfen and Rich, in press a).

However, knowledge of successful or unsuccessful application of results is uneven and differs across projects and studies. In the former, reports seldom indicate if and how applications of project results have been made successfully. Since this information often relies on news accounts, readers are more likely to hear of problems than successes: for example, people running off with funds meant for young people. The opposite appears to be true with the reporting of studies. Here we find a 'celebratory' tendency when the success of research efforts is given most attention.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Increased camera activity on a worldwide scale, largely facilitated by greater availability of electronics and digital technology, may be contributing to a growing suspicion of both the use of cameras and of pictures. The potential for deception and malicious surveillance are reaching the knowledge of ordinary people, who may more readily ask: 'What's

going to happen to these pictures?' 'Who said you could take my picture here?'. In short, there is a greater awareness of the politics underlying photographic practices, including the uses of cameras and pictures, of both taking pictures and 'being taken' in pictures. There is a growing cry for regulations to be put in place to reduce harm, deception and misrepresentation. This applies as well to police surveillance, photojournalism and visual research, among others.

In turn, ethical dimensions of the participatory media research landscape are often problematic (Prosser, 2000; Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001; Cannella and Lincoln, 2007; Nakamura, 2008; McDonnell, 2009). Ethical questions arise at all stages of research projects – from planning stages, before the research actually starts, to long after its completion. We do not yet have ethical codes of conduct or sets of guidelines for what constitutes 'good practice in different contexts and different socio-political environments' (Prosser and Loxley, 2008: 48). Much of the problem lies in the fact that existing ethics statements were originally directed toward word-based researchers, but they remain of limited use to visual researchers.

The maxim of 'do no harm' still holds an exalted priority of ethical concern, especially when children are involved. However with the multi-faceted process of media production and, perhaps more importantly, within media exhibition, display and even unanticipated distribution, there are many unknown variables, unanticipated reactions and results accompanied by points of possible danger and harm. The representational characteristics or features of photographic images pose questions and problems that eclipse the written word.

Two important examples stand out, both focusing on questions of identity, privacy and personal security. The first is the issue of *anonymity*. Researchers, parent institutions and sponsoring agencies generally agree that details of their research participants' identities should be protected; their privacy should be respected. In written contexts of reporting,

anonymity can be assured by the use of pseudonyms; visual research presents other obstacles and challenges. This applies to ‘found images’ already in existence as well as those produced as part of a current research project (Jon Prosser, personal communication, 2002).

An interesting twist is added when comparing what we have been referencing as either ‘projects’ or ‘studies’. In the former, participants may want to be shown and seen. However, in studies, legal safeguards may prescribe that people should *not* be seen or identified without explicit permissions.

A second issue is ‘*informed consent*’. Whereas this safeguard was once an answer to potential problems in using ordinary people in professional productions, this concept has come under considerable scrutiny given basic questions about shared understandings of what ‘informed’ means when so many uninformed and unforeseen possibilities are a reality. In addition, there is the complicated question of how ‘informed consent’ will be translated and understood by different subject groups and even ability levels of those with different disabilities? One can ask: ‘Consent but who for and what for?’ (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). One response has been to institute a progressive or sequential consent format whereby participants are asked to sign informed consent agreements at different times in any given study and agree to specific uses of their materials, for example, showing photographs or videotapes in academic publications, as part of professional presentations or Internet websites (Chalfen and Rich, in press b).

All institution-based research programs are subject to intense review and IRB approval. Primary attention is given to their concerns for research with human subjects; they insist that research proposals contain specific details for requiring informed consent/release forms, interview constraints, dissemination plans and the like. Often cited as a means of legal and hence financial protection for a sponsoring institution, ethical

concerns are increasingly important, in societies with varying degrees of enthusiasm for litigation.

In contrast, reports of community projects seldom mention these two points. Funding has not been reliant on ethical safeguards; my feeling is that PDs and participants feel the benefits of such work assets may well outweigh any potential detrimental effects or harmful results. Thus, again, we find differences in the relevancy of specific ethical issues between informal projects and academic studies. With regard to anonymity, many participants in projects want to be shown and seen as clearly identifiable individuals rather than concealed or renamed. In comparison, in academic studies, legal safeguards may dictate that people should not be recognized or identified without adequate adult consent.

Participatory visual researchers must be aware of the potential for trouble spots. Consider the following:

- It is very hard to predict interpersonal and political conflicts that might develop in the picture-taking process.
- There may be a chance of putting young participants at physical risk because they are carrying cameras.
- People have uneven feelings about the identification and identity of participants, especially when medical disabilities and related problems are involved.
- Confidentiality questions may arise regarding people who just happen to be in pictures taken in public places (passing or loitering individuals or crowds in a public space) about keeping the identity of subjects/participants confidential.
- Legal responsibilities may arise when PDs or Pls gain knowledge of unacceptable or illegal acts and behavior.
- The ease of image dissemination can pose additional trouble; people can (and certainly do) post project or program pictures to image-sharing websites with great ease.
- Research may involve different respondents – for example, parents, teachers, children and disabled people – each with different understandings of the project, different sensitivities and different expectations and needs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Practitioners of both projects and studies, PDs and PIs, have demonstrated and illustrated a great potential for the visual and audio-visual versions of participatory research methods. As more work is done, we gain a better idea of both advantages and disadvantages, of assets and liabilities.

Perhaps as a characteristic of a new sub-discipline, work in visual studies too often ignores the past; practitioners will not do sufficient homework and fail to account for previous efforts, mistakes and advances. There seems to be a divide between the excitement of getting on with the picture-making and, for many, the less-exciting need of doing background research in any attempt to learn from our predecessors and, in some cases, ancestors. In short, an accumulation of experience and knowledge would benefit future efforts.

One of biggest stumbling blocks remains with the 'back end' of projects and studies. For example, additional attention should be given to what happens after images are made, and, furthermore, what and how viewers learn from photographic results within these variations of bio-documentary narratives. If these pictures are said to serve as metaphorical voices, let us listen more and commit to discourse our interpretations of what is being shown, of what is being expressed by research participants. Whenever possible, we should take advantage of photo-elicitation to aid both 'speaking' and 'listening', to gain valuable insights from feedback, to ask the picture-makers what *they* see in their own visual expression and to neutralize any bias we bring to our observations and conclusions. In turn, this commentary allows us to incorporate their ideas into our communicative framework. Here we might have a chance to make genuine progress in gaining a greater understanding of the power of these modified bio-documentary methods.

The formal or informal analysis components of participatory media research remain as a weak point in the process; analysis of

photographic content is more often than not left undone. In too many cases, putting pictures on an exhibition wall appears to be the crowning achievement, accompanied by the justification, 'Let the pictures speak for themselves'. But some would argue that pictures never speak for themselves – viewers have to do the work in terms of looking, seeing, thinking and speaking (Chalfen, 2002). Much of this criticism reduces to the question: 'When is showing the same thing as saying?' (Rich, 2003) To chase the metaphor, practitioners, scholars and observers need to offer mindful ears to hear these liberated voices. We are seeing a need for more discussion of photographic results in the context of analytical models that we have at our disposal. But herein lies an important problem: the popular and scholarly literature on participatory media offers little in the way of analytical models to serve these needs. In short, great opportunities are lost for more informative, substantial conclusions.

In this spirit, the foregoing overview can provide new initiatives and projects with background and knowledge of previous efforts. Directors of new projects can exploit this report for a better view of alternatives – choices that can be applied to different contexts and circumstances. This variety of motivations, objectives, methods and outcomes alongside techniques and models of instruction contributes to understanding better that any innovation of communication can take many shapes and forms. One goal of this comparative overview has been to seek improvements in theory and practice underlying the general theme of applying visual research methods and participatory media to understand better the diversity of human visual culture.

NOTES

1 Jon Prosser suggests the inclusion of other examples such as drawn or painted self-portraits or related illustrations, personal timelines or life maps, concept maps, pictorial diaries on paper or related

medium (personal communication 2002). However, these forms will not be discussed here.

2 Lyn Yates (2010) introduces the distinction of participant visual media offering 'windows on the world' vs 'windows on the self' while admitting that some projects can do both.

3 An entire Special Issue of the journal *Visual Studies* (2010) has been recently devoted to issues of 'visual voice' and clarifying this ambiguous phrase.

4 By way of a reflexive footnote, I was a student of Worth, while in the doctoral curriculum at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in the mid-1960s. I was fortunate to serve as a research assistant for John Adair and Worth on the Navajo Film Themselves Project (Worth et al., 1997), and later worked with him alongside Dell Hymes and Erving Goffman to develop notions of socio-documentary filmmaking and 'sociovisitics' (Chalfen, 1981).

5 Just as one example, in a documentary film about the Navajo, one would expect to find an outsider's 'objective' representation of how Navajo live: but a bio-documentary would be made by a Navajo, and viewers would gain access to a filmic version of how a Navajo sees and structures his own life and the world around him.

6 The meaning of this term is not the same as 'bi-photography' described as: '... Barron exploring the intersection of science and biology with disorienting close-in views. Barron evokes a future in which, as his artist statement reads, "... we stand poised to gain direct control of our own evolution"' (see Libby, 2006).

7 Grants, fellowships, gifts and private donations have been means of support. Specific sources have included United Nations funds: e.g. UN children's agency UNICEF, Government-sponsored Neighborhood Renewal Fund, the Ford Foundation, the Abbott Fund, Johnson & Johnson, Big Brothers Big Sisters, university funding sources, just to mention a few. Finally, we see that some projects are more directly affiliated with art projects and picture-making – e.g. the Amateur Photographers and Cinematographers Association, Arts and Culture Council and the Society for Arts in Health Care – but most projects much less so.

8 An example is described in the following quotation:

An Indian film producer taught the children how to use cameras and basic filming techniques. He hopes this documentary will give the children a chance to express what is on their minds so that adults can better heal their psychological wounds. ... four children – despite never having seen a video camera before – have made a film, documenting their lives before and after the Tsunami. The boys, Sobarnath and Arivazhagan, and the girls, Padma Sivaraman, Manisha, Roja Ramani and Pakya, took 10 days to make the 20-minute

documentary under guidance from renowned Bollywood filmmaker Govind Nihalani (Anonymous, 2005a).

9 One might argue that professionals get in the way of 'natural' expression by prematurely structuring results; on the other hand, others would claim that this instructional model is a good thing, to let the young people take their photographic efforts further, to facilitate some form of later employment and potential financial gain.

10 In yet another collection of projects, we find the instructions included some form of verbal communication, such as when students were asked to keep a written journal alongside their photography (Nilsen, 2005). In one project, 'The children's [photographic] narratives were extended by asking them also to write and illustrate any aspect of their lives by providing them with notebooks, pencils, erasers and color pencils. The research methodology proved extremely successful in terms of the children's involvement in it, the use of photography as a means for children to both compose and reflect on aspects of interest to them in their daily lives, as well as generating richly detailed narratives (Venkateswar, 2005).

11 Wendy Ewald was trained as a professional art photographer and admitted to being consistently drawn to the expression of young people as she addressed conceptual, formal and narrative concerns. Ewald asked different groups of children 'to take photos of everything from their friends and homes to themselves'. As they got to know each other better, she asked them to use their imaginations more, and their photographs became more complex' (Hayes and Rader, 2006).

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FILMS

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