Book Review

Participatory Visual and Digital Methods

Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper
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This book explores of participatory visual and digital methods (PVDM), which may also be understood as Participatory Action Research (PAR). These methods use different forms of multimedia. Posited as a how to do PVDM for undergraduate and graduate students and university faculty, the book is intended for veteran as well as novice researchers. The authors provide examples of four different kinds of participatory and visual methods in addition to theoretical and ethical considerations for using these research designs. The book is divided into 10 chapters and may be broken up into three sections: why researchers should consider using PVDM (Chapters 1 and 2), different ways to use it (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7), how to archive and exhibit it (Chapter 8), and ethical and analytical considerations researchers must consider while obtaining data and turning their research into a final product (Chapters 3, 9, and 10). PVDM may be particularly interesting for investigators who use PAR in their studies, conduct research in a community where they are already familiar, or desire a tangible final product other than a scholarly paper.

In the introductory chapter, Gubrium and Harper establish what PVDM research methods are and provide the general outline of the book. In Chapter 2, the authors examine the history of PVDM, consider critiques of ethnography, which is a method used frequently in anthropology to gather data on particular cultural groups and propose several theoretical perspectives. Chapter 3 reviews the ethical implications of conducting PVDM and explains how the approach allows research subjects to participate in the research process by creating multimedia projects based on their lives. This chapter also discusses how power imbalances, reciprocity, and representation should be considered for the benefit of the research participants. Chapters 4 through 8 provide case studies about particular kinds of PVDM approaches, which are PhotoVoice, participatory film and videomaking, digital storytelling, participatory Geographic Information Systems, and participatory digital archives and exhibitions. Chapter 9 focuses on the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic research and how this can be connected with PAR. The final chapter poses questions for further thought, yet Gubrium and Harper admit they "end the book perhaps with more questions than answers given" (p. 25).

The authors believe PVDM and PAR methodologies have decolonizing properties and they see the potential for the Indigenous populations that have historically been over-researched (Smith, 2012) to be able to actively engage in the research process. In Chapter 2, *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Theory and Practice*, Gubrium and Harper refer to Tuhawai Smith's (2012) often cited book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, now in its second edition, and the importance of decolonizing the research process. Contrary to what the authors intend, the

authors primarily describe colonial research practices, which privilege the histories, cultures, and beliefs of western nations and their corresponding colonies, and describe western-centric research paradigms that are usually of benefit to researchers, not participants, and often administered through a top-down approach (Gaudry, 2011; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). The authors' tone, which is straightforward and direct, may not appeal to novice or student researchers who want or need more details, descriptions, or definitions of terms important when first learning about PVDM or PAR methodology. In Chapter 3, *Participatory Digital Research Ethics*, the authors reveal the importance of power dynamics and the iterative praxis of action and reflection, and assert that they have "huge implications for the relationships we build with those engaged in the research process" (p. 45) but they do not explain or describe what those implications are or why they are significant in the PAR process. Readers may want to turn to *Education, Participatory Action Research, and Social Change: International Perspectives* by Kapoor and Jordan (2009) for a more critical examination of PAR that is better at elucidating PAR's key elements.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 provide the most benefit to those who want to learn more about PAR methods of PhotoVoice, film and video, digital storytelling, and geographic information systems (GIS), respectively. The authors provide a myriad of concrete examples, along with the endorsement of scholars who used them. Specifically, these four chapters outline the positive and negative aspects of each and use specific, international contexts so that readers can easily compare different ways to involve the community in conducting research.

Chapter 4, *PhotoVoice Research*, explains how participants use photography to facilitate discussion on issues in their community as well as to outside organizations and policy makers. The authors include Claudia Mitchell's work on school violence in Swaziland and South African youth perspectives on HIV/AIDS as well as Krista Harper's work on Hungarian Romani observations on health and environment. Since there are aesthetic and ethical concerns surrounding PhotoVoice, Gubrium and Harper conclude that PhotoVoice research is best used in conjunction with other methods.

Chapter 5, *Participatory Film and Videomaking*, examines how film or video works as a political engagement tool, particularly around ideas of self-determination and cultural revitalization. However, the chapter does not outline the aesthetic, technical, and ethical difficulties that can occur with videomaking, despite similarities to those of PhotoVoice. In Chapter 6, *Digital Storytelling*, the reader is oriented to the complexities involved with digital storytelling. Since digital storytelling is a multifaceted method, the researcher may sometimes rely on PhotoVoice and/or videomaking methods if the participants do not have access to video or digital cameras. Of particular interest is the Digital Storyteller's Bill of Rights (p. 139)—from the case study on Amy Hill's work with Silence Speaks—and how it is the participants that are doing the storytelling, not the researcher(s) (see also Center for Digital Storytelling, 2013).

Chapter 7, *Participatory GIS*, illustrates how social knowledge of geography and cartography are utilized for community-based problem solving techniques. Conversely, because user-friendly yet technologically advanced GIS methods are still in development, experts are still needed to carry out all stages of these projects. Nevertheless, projects like Carroll Parrott Blue's Third Ward Storymapping project have literally been used to put marginalized peoples' voices on the map while simultaneously serving educational purposes.

In Chapter 8, *Participatory Digital Archives and Exhibitions as Research*, the authors critique a museum project created by the Doig River First Nation and two anthropologists. However, they are not as critical of any of the other projects in the book as they are of this one.

Dane Wajich, Dane-zaa Stories and Songs: Dreamers of the Land is a collaborative online museum exhibition hosted by the Virtual Museum of Canada through the Canadian Heritage Information Network. Gubrium and Harper find fault with the final project because people outside the Indigenous community (i.e., outsiders) who view the exhibition are not allowed to add content or provide comments. In contrast, Kate Hennessy, one of the anthropologists who worked on the project, explains that doing so does not "'serve the aims of the participatory process in an indigenous community'" (p. 182). To permit people from outside of Doig River First Nation to interpret the community and the Dane-zaa people is an individualistic exercise rather than one centered on Indigenous consensus-based decision making processes. The exhibition is intended to be an example of Indigenous peoples researching and writing back against colonialism; thus, permitting outsiders to add to the exhibit reinforces the colonial gaze that is put on Indigenous peoples when their cultural artefacts are put in museums.

Overall, Gubrium and Harper's book does a good job of providing numerous examples of participatory visual and digital methods to the reader. Despite this, what is absent from the text is critical thinking: the majority of the case studies provided within the text do not discuss limitations of the methods nor are there suggestions provided for their improvement. If the authors had offered constructive limitations and benefits of using the methods in the context of each case study throughout the book, they may better assist student and novice researchers in developing projects with PVDM and PAR research designs. As a result, *Participatory Visual and Digital Methods* functions as a satisfactory introduction to PVDM but lacks the academic rigor necessary to be utilized as a foundational text.

References

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