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Emancipatory Visions: Using Visual Methods to Co-construct Knowledge with Older Adults

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Abstract

This article calls for gerontologists to engage with visual methods in qualitative research as an innovative tool for community-engaged research that has potential to advance social justice in gerontology. Reflections about using visual methods from the intersectional standpoint of the authors, 3 younger women of color, are presented. In *Working the Hyphen*, J. Yeh shows how interpersonal dynamics are fundamental to visual methods and that attention to identity can provide new insights into aging while also reconstituting existing power dynamics that researchers must carefully consider. In *Employing Elicitation Techniques With Experts*, L. Reyes discusses how a colonial lens limits understandings of civic participation and erases contributions of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) older adults, proposing that elicitation techniques offer opportunities for BIPOC older adults to contribute their expertise to the research process and dissemination of findings beyond an academic audience. In *Pedagogy and Practicality*, H. S. Versey describes promises and complexities of scaling visual methods on multiple levels—teaching future generations of researchers the philosophy and practice of photovoice; negotiating university and community relationships through a service-learning project; and navigating identity between herself, her students, and research participants. In sharing our self-narratives, we integrate reflexivity into the research process and challenge power dynamics in knowledge construction.

Keywords: Critical gerontology, Emancipatory sciences, Qualitative research, Reflexivity

Research is a political activity. Researchers are responsible for theories and methods used to explore, explain, or ignore injustices. In the 1970s, Hobart Jackson—the "father of Black gerontology" (Pollard, 1987, p. 22)—criticized the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) for being a "predominantly White, predominantly middle-class establishment-oriented organization" (Jackson, 1971, p. 88). Gerontology's inattention to systemic problems that sustain oppression has stalled social progress to improve aging and health for all groups. Jackson's (1971) call to action raised a level of consciousness within the discipline,

articulating that the problems of aging were "microcosms of the problems of the nation" (p. 90). His prescient commentary continues to ring true.

As scholars from minoritized and oppressed communities, we can readily identify gaps in empirical research that do not speak to experiences of our communities (Brown et al., 2014). As Torres (2020) states:

> Studies have inadvertently regarded Western and White backgrounds as the norm in relation to which the aging of ethnic and racial minorities was made sense of, while

regarding the ways in which minorities make sense of the aging experience as deviations from these norms that needed to be explained. (p. 332)

Pressing needs exist to develop new tools and pathways of knowledge based on experiences, language, and intellect of older adults from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. We challenge gerontologists to think deeply about seemingly universal and "normative" theorizations of aging and older adult development (e.g., dis/engagement, activity, productive aging theories) that have derived from research conducted by and with primarily White American samples and scholars, overlooking perspectives from BIPOC communities. This article calls for gerontologists to be innovative with qualitative research to locate "spaces for potential emancipation within the social order" (Moody, 1993, p. vxii). We argue that visual methods, which use artistic media to produce and represent knowledge (Rose, 2016), provide these spaces and warrant more attention in gerontological research, training, and praxis.

Photovoice and elicitation techniques are two types of visual methods that approach participants as collaborators and knowledge producers. Photovoice is a process by which participants identify, represent, and describe their community, using cameras to produce images of their environment (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a method and praxis rooted in community-based participatory approaches, where equity and social action are central. Elicitation techniques seek to elicit knowledge directly from participants using photographs or other materials, such as poetry, collages, or other self-created or archival materials. Elicitation techniques assist participants in their reflective processes as they discuss their experiences, recall memories, and engage with researchers in meaning-making through a medium that is accessible to them (Lapenta, 2011).

Photovoice and elicitation techniques shift focus toward participants' creative processes, facilitating their agency and expertise throughout data collection and analysis, which aligns with emancipatory practice and participatory action research principles (Lapenta, 2011; Lykes & Scheib, 2015). The collaborative process offers opportunities to cultivate rapport and familiarity. In studies that seek to explore concepts that are sensitive or vary across cultures, languages, and histories, using visual methods can allow participants to express their experiences through their unique lens. When knowledge and meaning are produced collaboratively, researchers and participants' intentions are combined, representing their negotiations and interactions, achieving greater transparency and accountability.

This article uses heuristic methods to problem-solving and discovery with qualitative research approaches (Luker, 2008). We present reflections about using visual methods from the intersectional standpoint (Hill Collins, 2019) of the authors, three younger women of color who conduct community-engaged qualitative research. In sharing our self-narratives, we integrate reflexivity into our research process to show how power dynamics in knowledge construction is challenging and may be challenged.

Working the Hyphen

Throughout my research experiences, I self-consciously seek to *work the hyphen* between Self-Other—that is, the hyphen that separates and merges researcher and participants in politics of everyday life and coconstruction of knowledge (Fine, 1994). *Working the Hyphen* means advancing interrogations of contexts shared between researcher and participants, and visual methods offer epistemological opportunities to do so. My work with Andre, a participant in a prior study, exemplifies how visual methods afford coproduction mechanisms to understand age-friendly cities and communities (Yeh, 2022). Andre received a disposable camera to chronicle spaces and places that helped or hindered his ability to age in San Francisco. During research encounters, Andre led me through his photographs, illuminating social and spatial complexities of aging in San Francisco, a city with "age-friendly" designation (Figure 1).

Meaning does not lie in photographs alone, but also in how researchers and participants talk about them. While photographs may convey claims to realism, they are also visual fragments that may frame unconscious dimensions of self that help define a participant's identity or history. Furthermore, researchers may rethink the meaning of photographs produced and/or discussed during fieldwork in terms of academic discourse, giving photographs significance that may diverge from, or at least add to, meanings invested in them by participants. Because all visual modes can be implicated, this becomes an issue of power between *gazer* and *gazee* (Clarke, 2005). Interpretation of visual data must *work the hyphen* with conscious and cautious considerations. Moreover, this mode of inquiry can help (re)-shape or deconstruct the researcher's own understanding of their subjectivity through discursive practices.

Figure 1. Referencing a picture of a man Andre surreptitiously took to avoid being noticed as a potential "snitch," he stated, "Selling and shooting drugs."

For instance, in writing about Andre, I found myself conscious about how I participate in constructing "Others." I live in a neighborhood Andre called "the Avenues"—a part of San Francisco that was as conceptually distant for him as the suburbs outside the city, even though we only lived 2.5 miles apart. To what extent do Andre and I inscribe, or project, raced, classed, gendered, or aged interpretations or assumptions onto each other during research encounters? Would Andre deride age-friendly cities by calling them "honky town" if I were a White researcher? Would Andre admit fear of the streets, a place that required toughness to survive, if I were a male researcher? Would Andre risk identification as a potential "snitch" if we had not established rapport by spending months together doing daily activities before commencing with the visual methods component of the project?

As a university-based researcher, I am an "outsider" to Andre's world, but am committed to critically examine my situated subjectivity toward greater collaboration with participants. Rapport-building is a bidirectional, ongoing, and continuous process. The lived relationship between researcher and participants, however, is typically obscured, protecting distance, and privileging an objective stance. "Despite denials, qualitative researchers are always implicated at the hyphen" (Fine, 1994, p. 72)—that is, researchers are always being cocreated in relation to "the researched." Engaging in reflexive analysis is imperative for establishing trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative research. When engaging in research with those who experience daily injustices, exploitation, or subjugation, we *work the hyphen*, revealing more about ourselves and the structures of Othering.

For example, identity is a dynamic process and point of temporary attachment, politically situated, and negotiated between self and society. I am a first-generation, Asian American, cisgender woman, and three decades younger than Andre. As a term of endearment, Andre nicknamed me "Chopsticks." Ordinarily, I would not let someone call me "Chopsticks" because it is derogatory and racist; however, this nickname was how Andre signaled acceptance of me. He explained, "Look, you are cool. I'm comfortable around you, I trust you, and I like you."

If we want to call our research emancipatory, should we correct participants when they do something derogatory or racist? Is it better to let participants continue on-the-record and publish about it? Giving voice to participants does not mean my own identity or status cannot be stigmatized in the process. In this example, we see how systemic dynamics can be reconstituted through our work, even inadvertently, such as through microaggressions or reclaiming derogatory language that is "accepted" between researcher and participant.

In another example, while conducting fieldwork, Andre was occasionally assumed to be my pimp by others. Andre would ascribe me with identities other than "researcher," such as "homegirl" or "(homecare) worker," to minimize harassment and grant me entrée to the field. By doing this, Andre was deliberately defining my identity in relation to him. In anticipation of others' assumptions about our relationship, Andre preemptively smoothed over interactions through innocent lies to appease their expectations and avoid conflict—an "impression management" (Goffman, 1959) tactic.

These interactions force me to reckon with my intersectional standpoint as a researcher and woman of color who is hypervisible in the field, which brings moments of connection and scrutiny. In conducting research with Andre, my race-, class-, gender-, and age-coded body was on display, as was his. We were cocreated in a dialectical relationship to each other, "knottily entangled" (Fine, 1994, p. 72) in the research process and micropolitics of knowledge production (de Souza, 2019). Our identities were the "point of suture" (Hall, 2000, p. 19), which is the crux of *working the hyphen*.

These examples are reminders of how larger social structures and dynamics get (re)made and/or negotiated during knowledge-making due to normative values and priorities of our work as researchers. This also occurs in quantitative studies through the formulation of research questions and analysis approaches. By utilizing visual methods and locating myself in the research process, I was able to experience aging in place *with and through* Andre—to witness and participate in the conavigation of a city that endeavors to fulfill, but falls short of delivering, "age-friendly" ideals (Yeh, 2022).

Employing Elicitation Techniques With Experts

As a Latina immigrant graduate student who grew up in a predominantly immigrant and Latinx community, I realized that most research on civic participation among older adults was not addressing the experiences of Latinx community participation that I had benefited from. This was affirmed by a systematic review of 349 studies on later-life civic participation that found that only 1.7% included racial/ethnic minorities, and 1.1% included immigrants (Serrat et al., 2020). Literature that included BIPOC older adults often focused on explaining low rates of participation through individual-level perspectives, without attending to how historical systems of inequality contribute to differences in participation rates (Serrat et al., 2020). For example, this research primarily examined forms of participation (voting and volunteerism) that derived from White American society during colonization and segregation, when BIPOC communities were prohibited from participating. Few scholars emerged calling to expand our understanding of civic participation beyond voting and volunteerism to capture experiences that are more prominent among BIPOC older adults (Martinez et al., 2011; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Torres & Serrat, 2019). Building from this research, I designed a phenomenological study that sought to center

the experiences and expertise of African American and Latinx immigrant older adults and inquired into the sociopolitical, cultural, historical, and personal contexts that shaped their participation across the life course (Reyes, 2022).

As a scholar-activist, I seek to produce research that serves communities that have been systematically oppressed and utilize methods that challenge power dynamics rooted in extractive research (Kouritzin & Nakawage, 2018). One of my main objectives was to develop a research project that would not only expand our intellectual imagination of civic participation but would also be meaningful and accessible to the participants involved. With this intent, I approached participants as experts, people who could share knowledge that I had not found in the empirical literature. The methods were selected for their capacity to amplify participants' voice through storytelling and visual materials.

Document elicitation is a useful tool to "make the invisible visible" (Bukowski & Buetow, 2011, p. 739) and for data triangulation. These methods are more accessible and sensitive to systematically oppressed populations, encouraging them to exercise their agency when sharing their story. I employed the elicitation exercise as a complementary tool that could deepen my understanding and analysis of participants' civic participation and could be utilized in the dissemination of study data and results for a nonacademic audience. The visuals allowed participants space to reflect on their experiences prior to our interview and provided a tool for recalling memories and probing into their experiences.

Initially, I chose to conduct visual elicitation technique and was prepared to provide participants with disposable cameras. However, the study was interrupted by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and my methods shifted to accommodate quarantine policies. Therefore, I made the elicitation exercise optional and expanded beyond photography to allow participants to digitally submit visual or written documents that were readily accessible to them. While the elicitation exercise proved meaningful to participants who participated and produced rich insight about their experiences of civic participation, only five sent documents before the second interview to discuss. Four additional participants sent photographs and a recording referencing their stories after the interviews had concluded.

Materials gathered through the elicitation technique allowed me to witness civic participation through participants' unique perspectives. After data collection ended, participants were sent a secondary consent form for the purpose of publishing their stories and documents online; 13 participants agreed and signed consent forms. Their photographs, collage, poetry, and drawings (Figure 2) were used to bring their stories to life in the study's website (ourwayoflifearchive.com) and more recently an Instagram page (@ourwayoflife_owl) where I share their quotes and stories. To minimize the risk of having stories and images

Figure 2. Participant's collage showing what civic participation means to them.

used out of context, I only use materials that participants consented to publicly share, maintain their anonymity, keep them informed about how their stories and documents are being used, and ensure that the information posted does not negatively implicate them or misrepresent them. Working with participants as experts changed the dynamic of our relationship, I saw myself as accountable to them and responsible for producing research and communication materials that did their stories justice. While this research served as my dissertation thesis, their active involvement in editing their stories, reviewing, and editing the website, and our communication about the use of their materials demonstrates a collective commitment to this work.

Pedagogy and Practicality: Teaching Visual Methods to Future Generations

What does place mean to someone for whom stability is elusive? This question drove my first project using visual methods, as well as my own reflexive process. I sought a window into the world of older adults experiencing homelessness and housing instability in a small city in Connecticut. In doing so, I also questioned my own positionality in relation to participants and the research question itself.

As someone who has lived outside the region where I was raised, I still think of my birthplace as "home." I began to wonder then, what does home mean for people who are transient and aging, or characterized as *unhomed*? I wanted to understand these issues from a relative place of privilege as a professor, stably housed, and as a younger, cisgender woman of color. In this context, I was an outsider. My participants were older adults, the majority of whom were White, male, and struggled with housing and social issues. "Housing instability," defined broadly as challenges associated with securing and maintaining affordable housing, is a phrase I learned early in my career when I first began to connect systemic dots contributing to poverty, unstable housing, and health. The idea that housing instability leads to distinctly different pathways in how older

adults experience aging is a complex issue that has yet to be fully explored in academic literature. Overwhelmingly, most older adults prefer to age in place, expressing a desire to live in their own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level. Yet, what "independence" looks like in relation to housing often varies. As a researcher, I struggled to picture how older adults experiencing homelessness regarded the idea of aging independently.

These questions led to a community-partnered photovoice project with a local soup kitchen that served lower-income residents. In 2018, I met with the soup kitchen's director to discuss my research and her goal to recruit more student volunteers to help with weekly operations. Our conversation culminated in two coconstructed ideas. I would recruit participants for my photovoice project from the soup kitchen, and students enrolled in my undergraduate service-learning research methods course would help facilitate the project while volunteering at least two hours/week at the soup kitchen. This collaborative framework facilitated dual aims. First, I connected the soup kitchen with university students who might continue to volunteer beyond the course. Second, holding classes where I would eventually recruit participants enabled me to build rapport with patrons to better understand their experiences. This strategy was explicitly antineocolonial, modeling the critical aspect of "showing up" (vs. dropping in) to build community trust, a foundation for lasting relationships (Adame et al., 2021).

All goals of the research plan were cocreated in collaboration with the community partner. After several weeks of volunteering, holding select classes at the soup kitchen and establishing a presence, we explained the project goals in detail—we wanted participants to "show us" important places to them in the community, places that felt home-like, or even those that seemed unwelcoming. We wanted to experience a day in their shoes through a place-based lens, while emphasizing that they were the ones behind the camera, making decisions about what to shoot and which aspects of their lives they wanted to share. This subjectivity, often framed as a detriment in positivist research, was a tremendous asset in creating new knowledge about an area we knew little about.

Participants who chose to enroll in the project took and returned cameras within a two-week period. After developing the film, I randomly assigned students to interview one participant about their photos using the SHOWeD method (Wang & Burris, 1997). The SHOWeD method is an interview protocol used in photovoice research to engage with and discuss participant photographs. Students engaged participants in a conversational interview using SHOWeD prompts, learning qualitative methods by doing them. Student interviewers were 18–24 years old and primarily White, from middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds. Rapport was established between students and participants, not unlike a grandparent showing and

retelling a grandchild about treasured memories. In this way, the age (and possibly race) of student interviewers likely made for an easier conversation, in which participants felt comfortable taking the lead and describing what was important to them about their photographs.

Conversations followed the same protocol and format, with participants browsing pictures they had taken and discussed their favorites. Typical interviews would last an entire class period (90 min), but some were difficult to interrupt, as participants easily assumed roles as experts and teachers. At the semester's conclusion, we asked participants to choose one photograph they would like displayed for a public exhibition at the soup kitchen (Figure 3). All "favorited" photographs were printed and framed, serving as the backdrop for a free, open-to-the-public exhibition and community conversation about aging, housing, and scarcity. Participants spearheaded discussions with invited guests, community members, and university officials, talking about their own experiences feeling excluded within the community (e.g., town–gown relations) and needed services (e.g., job-creation support and housing services) that would benefit individuals experiencing homelessness.

Afterward, several participants commented that they felt "seen" by participating in this project. I also felt seen, in a different way. The project allowed us to trust and, in some sense, understand one another. The sentiment of "being seen" underscores what we do know about older adults experiencing homelessness—they are visible all around us, yet invisible in our minds, research, and policy. I am fortunate to have been able to "see" housing instability in a new way, teach about it, and engage in community conversations about it.

Ultimately, our partnership provided a unique opportunity to engage and learn from one another. As researchers, we balanced what we gained with giving what was asked of us—time and a platform to voice participant concerns. To do community-engaged work with older adults as a

Figure 3. Participant photographs showing "meaningful" places around town.

younger, college-educated, cisgender, and stably housed Black woman, I am reminded that research is indeed a political activity. As researchers, we must show up, demonstrate cultural humility, and be willing to truly partner with participants we work with, learning about experiences we can never truly grasp.

Discussion

Broadening the scope of aging research to include marginalized narratives remains an ongoing process. Failure to critically engage in the "why" and "how" of knowledge creation risks repeating the perils Hobart Jackson (1971) warned about 50 years ago. Therefore, gerontological research must center critical, emancipatory perspectives that address the political economy of knowledge production (Estes, 1993; Katz, 1996): How is gerontological knowledge produced? Who produces it? How does it become privileged? This article explores these questions by providing reflections from each author's experiences. We argue that visual methods provide a vehicle for community-engaged research and have potential to advance social justice in gerontology (Gilmore-Bykovskyi et al., 2021).

Recent sociopolitical upheavals rooted in anti-Black racism, anti-immigrant policies (Dondero & Altman, 2020), anti-Asian hate (Ma et al., 2021), as well as threats of climate change (Versey, 2021), gentrification and displacement (Versey et al., 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic's inequitable context (Buffel et al., 2021) have intensified precarity (Grenier et al., 2020) and reinforced existing inequalities in aging. The present moment "cries out for emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression" (Denzin, 2017, p. 8). This cry aligns with GSA's commitment to inclusion, equity, and diversity in the nurturance of underrepresented scholars and promotion of scientific action (Meeks et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential that gerontologists and those in positions of power regarding funding, publishing, and career advancements recognize the financial, material, and time resources needed to do ethical, reflective, innovative, and community-engaged research. We call this process "slow research" to emphasize the importance of methodological rigor and accountability that challenges the extractive nature in which research has historically been carried out. Time needed to cultivate trust with participants requires reflexive practices that call attention to the positionalities and identity-work that scholars of color within and adjacent to academia often negotiate.

We are in a time of transition, where critical qualitative methods can help deepen our knowledge to reimagine society. We challenge ourselves, and fellow researchers, to engage with visual methods as an innovative tool for community-engaged research because it is rigorous for subverting power dynamics rooted in extractive research practices. To capture the kaleidoscopic experience of aging requires new approaches and scholarship from investigators from diverse backgrounds to cultivate a self-reflexive, critical, gerontological imagination (Torres, 2019). Gerontology has a unique opportunity to shift the lens from a white, Eurocentric epistemological base to one that embraces members of systematically oppressed communities whose experiences and stories have been pushed to the margins, until now.

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