Participatory photography as theory, method and praxis: analyzing an entertainment-education project in India[1]

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Abstract

In this article I analyse the role of photographs, generated in a participatory manner, in entertainment-education practice and research. The main tenets of participatory communication as well as certain notable experiences in using participatory photography are discussed. Our experience with using participatory photography with listeners of an entertainment-education radio initiative in Bihar, India, where participants combined introspection, reflection, and action, is then analyzed. Through photographs and their accompanying narratives, our participants drew connections between the entertainment-education text they consumed and their lived experiences, articulating certain ideas that were previously silenced, overlooked, or rejected. Often, inspired by the storyline of the entertainment-education text, the narratives called for wider community discussion, mobilization, and action. We conclude our article by discussing the potential and caveats associated with using this visual approach in human communication research.

Keywords: participatory photography, photo-voice, participation, entertainment-education, and visual narratives.

In his work with marginalized and oppressed groups, noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire believed in the importance of creating opportunities for people to visualize their social problems and to use this visualization as a basis to stimulate collective introspection, discussion, and action. The purpose of visualization – through drawings, sketches, and photographs – was to engage participants in their own learning

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combining action and reflection that Freire called praxis (Carlson, Engebretson and Chamberlain 2006).

In 1973, while conducting a literacy project in a barrio of Lima, Peru, Freire and his team asked people questions in Spanish, but requested the answers in photographs. When the question 'What is exploitation?' was asked, some people took photos of a landlord, grocer, or a policeman (Boal 1979, 123). One child took a photo of a nail on a wall. It made no sense to adults, but other children were in strong agreement. The ensuing discussions showed that many young boys of that neighbourhood worked in the shoe-shine business. Their clients were mainly in the city, not in the barrio where they lived. As their shoe-shine boxes were too heavy for them to carry, these boys, rented a nail on a wall (usually in a shop), where they could hang their boxes for the night. To them, that nail on the wall represented 'exploitation'. The 'nail on the wall' photograph spurred widespread discussions in the Peruvian barrio about other forms of institutionalized exploitation, including ways to overcome those (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006).

The present article analyzes the role of visuals –especially photographs generated through participatory research practices – in entertainment-education practice and research. The main tenets of participatory communication, including the dialogic pedagogical processes espoused by Paulo Freire, as well as certain notable experiences in using participatory photography, are presented. We then analyze our experience with using participatory photography with listeners of an entertainment-education radio initiative in Bihar, India, where participants combined introspection, reflection, and action. We conclude by discussing the potential and caveats associated with this visual approach to participatory communication.

Participatory communication

The discourse of participatory communication gathered momentum in the 1970s, as discontent mounted with top-down and trickle-down communication approaches to social change (Jacobson 1993; Servaes, Jacobson and White 1996; Uphoff 1985). Participatory communication is defined as a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare (Singhal 2001, Singhal and Devi 2003).

All participation is communication-driven, but all communication is not participatory (White and Nair 1999). Gumucio Dagron (2001) provided a useful typology to distinguish participatory communication from other communication strategies for social change (Table 1). Participatory communication means working with and by the people, as opposed to working on or working for the people. For many observers, 'participation' and 'participatory' make sense as means. That is, with participation, projects and programs become more humane, more effective, and more sustainable (Chambers 1983, 1999). For others, participation is an end in itself: A set of desired

processes and relationships. Whatever the mix of reasons, a new consensus has put participation at the centre stage of social change initiatives during the 1990s. While there may not be a clean way of resolving the issue of participation as means or ends, the compass of participation rests on preserving and enhancing the dignity of the individual.

Table 1. Participatory Versus Non-Participatory Communication Strategies

Participatory Communication Strategies	Versus	Non-Participatory Communication Strategies
<u>Horizontal</u> lateral communication between participants	Versus	<u>Vertical</u> top-down communication from senders to receivers
<u>Process</u> of dialogue and democratic participation	Versus	<u>Campaign</u> to mobilize in a short-term without building capacity
<u>Long-term</u> process of sustainable change	Versus	<u>Short-term</u> planning and quick fix solutions
<u>Collective</u> empowerment and decision-making	Versus	<u>Individual</u> behaviour change
<u>With</u> community's involvement	Versus	<u>For</u> the community
<u>Specific</u> in content, language, and culture	Versus	<u>Massive</u> and broad-based
<u>People's needs</u> are the focus	Versus	<u>Donors' musts</u> are the focus
<u>Owned</u> by the community	Versus	<u>Access</u> determined by social political and economic factors
<u>Consciousness</u> raising	Versus	<u>Persuasion</u> for short-term

Source: Gumucio Dagron (2001).

At the risk of oversimplifying, one may contend that there are two major, but interrelated, approaches to participatory communication (Servaes 1999). The first approach centres on the dialogic pedagogy of the noted Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. The second approach, often broadly labelled as the participatory community media approach, or the alternative communication approach, centres on the ideas of access, participation, self-determination, and self-management, sharpened during the UNESCO New World Information Order debates of the 1970s. While both participatory approaches share several commonalties, their arenas of communicative application have been somewhat distinct. For instance, the Freirean theory of dialogic communication is based more on interpersonal and group dialogue in a community setting, and hence, has found more application in the practice of community development, literacy education, participation, and transformation. The participatory

214

community media approach focused on issues of public and community access to appropriate media, participation of people in message design and media production, and self-management of communication enterprises. Its applications are thus more in community radio and television, street theater and folk media, participatory video, and community informatics, Internet, and telecentres.

Paulo Freire's Dialogic Pedagogy[3]

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationist, in his classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970) argued that most political, educational, and communication interventions fail because they are designed by technocrats based on their personal views of reality. They seldom take into account the perspectives of those to whom these programs are directed.

Freire's most important career lesson came in the early 1950s when he was in charge of establishing adult literacy programs in poverty-stricken Northeastern Brazil. During an introductory seminar for illiterate and semi-illiterate adults, a wage labourer, who had listened to Freire's presentation on the benefits of learning to read and write, challenged Freire to understand the 'world' in which members of the audience were living. Speaking in the local vernacular, the illiterate labourer painted a highly evocative word-picture of the grinding poverty that he and his family endured, of his inability to speak like educated people, and daily struggles with domination and exploitation.

The labourer's moving story, told in his words, influenced Freire's ideas about what education should and should not be. He realized that an educator's greatest challenge was to understand, appreciate, and respect the knowledge of people's lived experience as expressed in their vernacular. He also realized that politics and pedagogy were inseparable. With experimentation and experience, Freire's pedagogical methods incorporated ideas on critical reflection, dialogue and participation, autonomy, democracy, problematization, and the crucial connection between theory and practice (Freire 1970).

Freire's dialogic pedagogy emphasized the role of 'teacher as learner' and the 'learner as teacher', with each learning from the other in a mutually transformative process (Freire 1970). The role of the outside facilitator is one of working *with*, and not *for*, the oppressed to organize them in their incessant struggle to regain their humanity (Singhal 2001). True participation, according to Freire, does not involve a subject-object relationship, but rather a subject-subject relationship.

In Freirean pedagogy, there is no room for teaching 'two plus two equals four'. Such rote pedagogy, according to Freire, is dehumanizing as it views learners as empty receptacles to be 'filled' with expert knowledge. Freire criticized this 'banking' mode of education, in which 'deposits' are made by experts. The scope of action allowed students (or intended beneficiaries) 'extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits' (Freire 1970, 58). Instead, Freire advocated problem-posing

215

as a means to re-present to people what they know and think, not as a lecture, but as an involving problem. Freire emphasized that the themes underlying dialogic pedagogy should resonate with people's experiences and issues of salience to them, as opposed to well-meaning but alienating rhetoric (Freire 1970). Once the oppressed, both individually and collectively, begin to critically reflect on their social situation, possibilities arise for them to break the 'culture of silence' through the articulation of discontent and action.

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.

The role of visuals in participatory action and research

Along with Freirian scholars, for several decades, scholars and practitioners of visual sociology, visual anthropology, and visual communication have had an interest in visual documentation and activism (Wang 2003). Sociologists and anthropologists have primarily used photographs to document social realities, looking at local communities as 'objects' of study. For instance, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's 1942 book, *Balinese Character*, included 759 photographs to document Balinese life. The cultural meanings of the photographs were explained in the text. Documentary photographers and filmmakers have visually documented drugs and drug culture (Clark 1971), the U.S. civil rights movement (Hansberry 1964), the anti-Vietnam War movement (Kerry 1971), and the AIDS crisis, raising public awareness of these social issues.

In contrast to the primary use of visuals for documentation, as done mostly by visual sociologists and anthropologists, the relationship between the researcher and the subject is more dialogic, when employing the technique of photo-elicitation. In a typical photo-elicitation interview, a discussion is stimulated and guided by images (Collier 1967). While the researcher takes pictures of the subject's world, it is the individual pictured (or an individual from the pictured world) who interprets the images, creating a 'listening' opportunity for the researcher.

Participatory photography

Known variously as 'photo voice,' 'talking pictures', or 'visual voices', this technique of participatory photography puts the camera in the hands of the people, who are encouraged to document and co-share their own reality through photos (Wang 1999; Wang and Burris 1994, Wang, Burris and Xiang 1996). The process of taking a photograph provides an opportunity to develop a story that was previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006). Further, the photograph's narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, spurring

community members to further reflect, discuss, and analyze the issues that confront them (Lykes 1997, Wang 2003).

Participatory photography has been utilized in varied settings with diverse populations, including the homeless in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Wang 2003); peer educators for youth sexuality in Cape Town, South Africa, (Moss 1999); young homeless women in Detroit (Killion and Wang 2000); with slum youth in Nairobi, Kenya and poor women in the Peruvian Amazon (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty 2006); and with street children in Guatemala (Gonzalez 2003). The purpose of Fotokids in Guatemala, for instance, is to develop skills and self-esteem among children (Gonzalez 2003). Founded in 1991 by Nancy McGirr, an American photojournalist, underprivileged Guatemalan children learn camera skills to shoot pictures, and to articulate their viewpoint through photos to community members. The work of Fotokids, which has since expanded to neighbouring Honduras, has been exhibited in Britain, Germany, and Spain, and featured in promotional campaigns for children's rights. Several 'Fotokids' are presently studying art, photography, and journalism, having found an empowering way to express themselves.

Another notable example of participatory photography from Guatemala is PhotoVoice, a project of the Association of Maya Ixil Women, who live in the highlands of Guatemala. PhotoVoice has helped local Mayan communities to recover stories of its three-decade long internal war, reflect upon its debilitating effects, and rebuild community (Lykes 1997). Through photography, indigenous Mayan women developed a public record of their lives. PhotoVoice was inspired by the action-based participatory photography project conducted by rural Chinese women in Yunnan province (a photo book called *Visual Voices: 100 photographs of Village China by the Women of Yunnan Province*, 1995, was compiled).

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.

Participatory photography in the Taru Project

Inspired by this Freirean technique, disposable cameras were handed out (under the guidance of the present authors) in 2002 to 11 listeners (7 women and 4 men) of *Taru*, an entertainment-education radio program in India. *Taru* was a 52-episode entertainment-education radio soap opera, broadcast in four Indian states – Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh –from February, 2002 to February, 2003. Its purpose was to promote gender equality, small family size, reproductive health, caste and communal harmony, and community development (Singhal, Papa, Sharma, Pant, Worrell, Muthuswamy and Witte 2006).

The eleven listeners of *Taru*, who participated in the present study, hailed from three villages – Abirpur, Kamtaul, and Madhopur – in two adjoining districts,

Muzzaffarpur and Vaishali, of India's Bihar State. Both districts ranked very poorly on development indicators among all 590 districts of India (Population Foundation of India 2002). For instance, in Muzzaffarpur, the male literacy rate was 60% and the female literacy rate 35%, with 54% of girls married off before the age of 18. Only 31% of children in Muzzaffarpur were completely immunized and 81% of them were underweight. In District Vaishali, the male literacy rate was 64% compared to the female literacy rate of 38%, and here 63% of girls were married off before the age of 18. Only 22% of Vaishali's children were completely immunized and 51% of them were underweight (Population Foundation of India 2002). Further, in these and other districts of Bihar, the 'good life' is mostly the domain of men (Harter, Sharma, Pant, Singhal and Sharma 2007). A son's birth is celebrated as a joyous occasion, whereas a girl's birth is viewed as a burden by her family. Sons usually attend schools, whereas daughters tend to housework and care for younger siblings (Jung 1987).

Further, all 11 listeners who participated in our study were, respectively, members of their village-based Taru listening clubs, informal groups that got together once a week to listen to the radio series, discuss its contents, take some collective decisions, and actions. In all three villages – Abirpur, Kamtaul, and Madhopur, some spectacular actions were undertaken by the *Taru* listening club members. Inspired by the fictional character of Neha, who establishes a school to educate dalit (lower caste) children in *Taru's* storyline, listening club members in Abirpur established a school for *dalit* children. In Kamtaul village, Neha's character inspired the establishment of an adult literacy centre for poor *dalit* woman. In Madhopur village, moved by the celebration of a young girl's birthday in the *Taru* storyline, a couple decided to celebrate their daughter's birthday. The actions of this one couple led to a string of birthday celebrations for girls in Madhopur, complete with balloons, music, sweets, and cakes. This practice then spread to several neighbouring villages of Madhopur, where group listening to Taru occurred (Singhal, Rao, and Pant 2006).

How were our eleven participants selected? All were avid listeners of *Taru*, active members of the local listening club, and highly motivated youth. Ranging in age from 15 to 44 years, participants self-selected themselves, volunteering for this research activity. In handing out cameras we, as researchers, ensured that the cameras were fairly distributed across the three villages, and that we could obtain both the female and male perspective.

The purpose of our participatory photography exercise was manifold. We were interested in how our participants' photos and their accompanying narratives (1) spoke to association between their lived reality and the social problems contested in the Taru radio serial, for instance, gender inequality, (2) flagged certain social issues that were addressed in *Taru* as being important for discussion and action within their own community, (3) articulated point-of-view that prior to the broadcast of Taru were rejected, silenced, or overlooked, and (4) talked about *Taru's* influence on them or their community?

As opposed to asking subjects' questions, and thereby constraining the nature and scope of their word responses, they were asked to shed light on their engagement with the *Taru* radio series through the language of images (Singhal, Sharma, Papa and Witte 2004). Our invitation to 'shoot back' responses yielded some 145 photographs. After developing these pictures, we took the pictures back to our participants and asked the participants to narrate what the picture was depicting, what it meant to them, why did they take it, and so on.

Results and analysis

Co-sharing of reality

Several photographs allowed the participants to co-share the reality of their lived experiences in rural Bihar, echoing problems that were raised and contested in the Taru radio drama. Photographs captured (a) the prevalent traditions and customs of Bihar's patriarchal society, (b) the norm of large family sizes and the resulting low levels of maternal and child health, (c) how children, especially young girls, engage in hard manual labour at home and in the fields, (d) how young girls are denied an education because of responsibilities to attend to household chores, and (e) how women's health is at risk because of poverty and other environmental factors.

The photo taken by Soni (16 years, Abirpur village) of an old woman, who is trying to cover her head with her sari, captured the strong patriarchal undercurrents in rural Bihar. She noted: 'This is a very old woman who always covers her head when any man passes her. I asked her why she covered her head and she said because the man who passed us is her brother-in law. Even if he is younger to her because he is from her in-laws family she covered her head. It's to show respect.'

Shailendra's (44 years, Kamtaul village) photo of a young mother and her six children depicted the social norm of large families in rural Bihar which result in low levels of both maternal and child health. He noted: 'This woman has six children. Most of them are malnourished and don't keep good health. She had so many children at a young age, which has affected her and the children.'

Meenakshi's (20 years, Madhopur village) photo of a young woman sitting in front of a smoke *chulha* (clay oven) pointed to how poverty in rural areas jeopardized the health of village women. She noted: 'This oven is a source of smoke, which affects the health of women. The WHO has said the women who use this oven inhale 40 percent more smoke than an average person but due to poverty or other reasons this is the primary source of cooking.'

Several photographs captured how young children –both boys and girls – engaged in hard manual labour. Manjeet's (19 years, Abirpur village) photo of a young boy working in a field was accompanied by the following narrative: 'This boy is planting some seeds. This represents how this boy goes to school as well as he works on his parents' farm.' A similar photo of a young girl taken by Manjeet was accompanied by the following statement: 'This girl is planting potatoes. She is farming.' Several

219

photos spoke to how young girls are held back at home to help with household chores, depriving them the opportunity to go to school. Vandana's (18 years, Kamtaul village) photograph of a young girl who is helping with household chores was accompanied by the following narrative: 'This is a small girl and she is working so hard, as you can see. One should not make young girls work so hard. They should be encouraged to study further.' Meenakshi's photo of a 4 or 5 year old with half a dozen goats reinforced this sentiment: 'This girl is taking the goats to graze.... girls are not encouraged to study, in the same way this girl is sent to work. Parents shouldn't do this. Girls should be sent to school, but because of poverty girls are not given an opportunity and their future is ruined.'

A call for community discussion and action

Several photographs, and their accompanying narratives, identified certain social issues (that were addressed in *Taru*) as being important for discussion, mobilization, and action within their own community.

Kumkum's (18 years, Abirpur village) photo of a woman in front of her sewing machine was accompanied by a call to the community to engage in more self-help and income-generating initiatives, especially for uneducated women: 'This woman teaches sewing at home and earns money. Every village should have a stitching centre. Women who don't go to school or are illiterate can at least do this. You don't have to be literate to learn this and earn enough to stand on your feet. They (women) won't have to depend on anyone for money or anything else.'

Vandana's clicked a photo of 16 year old girl, who was married a year or two ago, advocating for stopping this practice of child marriage. Vandana noted: 'She was married at a very young age. You can make out how sad she is. One should not marry a girl at such a young age. Her life also gets ruined and there are other problems too. This was the age for her to study and she is married with a kid.'

Vandana (18 years, Kamtaul village) took another photo to advocate for rural communities to have small families, noting how large families contribute to poverty and malnutrition. Vandana narrated the photo of a young mother with six children as follows: 'Too much population! One woman has so many children. People from different castes and tribes come to the village. They have such large families. Even food is being cooked outside. Will they be able to provide for so many family members? They don't have a home, they have a shelter and they were sitting outside with their kids so I took the picture. Some people have everything, some nothing!'

Several photographs documented the unhygienic, unsanitary, and polluted conditions of the village environment, and called for the community members to get their acts together to do something about them. Vandana's photo, and its accompanying narrative, captured this sentiment: 'There is so much trash next to where these people are sitting. There is sewage close by too, which is a breeding ground for flies. All these lead to the spread of diseases. I took this picture so that

we can clean up places like this.' Meenaskhi (20 years, Madhopur village) took a long shot of the village well and its surrounding area and noted: 'This is near a well in our village, which is very useful for us. But next to the well there is dirty stagnant water. This dirty water is not cleaned which affects people who live nearby and also those who use this water. I haven't done anything about it. But I feel I can tell people to keep cleaning. They may not listen to me but at east somebody can put chemicals to clean it.

Voicing a marginalized, silenced, or rejected story

Several photographs provided an opportunity for participants to articulate points-of-view that were, prior to the broadcasts of Taru, rejected, silenced, or overlooked in their community. In some cases the participants, through their photos, spoke on behalf of 'others', including for the children, the elderly, and the dalits (people of the lower caste). In other cases, the participants gave voice to their own previously-silenced stories.

Speaking for Others. Several photographs that were discussed in the previous section gave voice to children's causes, advocating, for instance, for the education of young girls. Children's voices are often missing in societal discourse, and several of our participants (as noted previously) tried to speak on their behalf.

Several other photographs portrayed the neglect of the elderly by their children. While it is still the norm in rural Bihar for sons (usually the eldest one) to take care of elderly parents, the photographs suggested that such was not always the case. For instance, Vandana's (18 years, Kamtaul Village) photo of an old man on a dirt floor captured the following sentiment: 'He is a very poor old man who is disabled. He has three sons neither of whom takes care of him. He was sleeping on the floor in dirt.' Meenakhi's (20 years, Madhopur village) photo of an elderly man was accompanied by a similar narrative: 'These days he doesn't work. He did whatever was in his capacity to educate his two children. His children are grown up and have their own family. But, today his children don't support him and do not look after him. They are disrespectful. This is a big problem in our society. Parents rear their children but then their children distance themselves from their parents. How do you think the parents feel? This shouldn't happen.' Soni (16 years, Abirpur village) found irony in the situation that parents in rural Bihar crave for a male child, who in later life abandons the parents. Her photo of a dilapidated straw house in Abirpur Village was accompanied by the following narrative: 'In this house, the son doesn't look after the parents at all. People crave for a son but then see....this [man] has a son, a daughter-in law and even grandsons but nobody looks after them. I felt really bad for the people who live there [in the house]. I felt that if they had a daughter the situation would have been different.'

Some photographs spoke on behalf of the *dalits*, especially emphasizing opportunities for their education. For instance, Kumkum's (18 years, Abirpur

221

village) photo of a teenage dalit girl was accompanied the following narrative: 'This is a lower caste girl. She does housework, as she is uneducated. Education is very important. Say if you need to sign; you cannot sign unless you are educated or you cannot read a letter unless you know how to read.' Vandana (18 years, Kamtaul village) took a photo to show how the dalits could engage in self-help and literacy activities. She noted: 'These women are from the backward classes and are teaching other backward women.'

Speaking for Self. Several photographs gave voices to the participants own stories that were previously marginalized, silenced, overlooked, or rejected. For instance, Soni (16 years, Abirpur village) asked someone to take a picture of her with a telephone and provided the following narrative: 'Earlier when I used to hold the phone my hands would shake now they don't anymore.' Soni's narrative alludes to how material symbols of progress, such as a telephone, are usually the domain of urban elite homes, not of rural households like her own. Further, when such technology comes to the village (Soni's home is one among a few hundred households that has a telephone), usually such symbols are appropriated by the men. Through her narrative, which is consistent with themes promoted in the *Taru* storyline, she is voicing the empowering dimensions of appropriating products and practices that were not within her purview previously.

In another photo, Vandana (18 years, Kamtaul village), who asked her cousin to take the picture, is standing next to a young man of her age (about 17-years-old). When asked what the picture signified, she said: 'This is my friend. He is [attending] my school. People say that girls shouldn't talk to boys. Some people still think that way and say, 'why did you take this picture?' But I think I did the right thing and it is okay.' When one of the present authors further debriefed her on this picture a few months later, she noted: 'Yes, this boy studies in my high school and we attend the same coaching class. I feel comfortable talking to him and sharing my thoughts with him. I am not shy and timid like other girls of Village Kamtaul, who feel nervous talking to boys. If Taru and Shashikant [two of the main characters in the radio soap opera] can be good friends, why can't we?' In the picture, Vandana is donning jeans, an outfit that conservative villagers regard as inappropriate. Also, perhaps for the first time in Kamtaul village, a young woman invited a young man to stand and pose with her. Interactions between young unmarried men and women are taboo in rural Bihar. Such a norm is understood; it is not debated, discussed, or voiced. Vandana credited her listening of *Taru* as being the engine for her to voice such hitherto 'silenced' thoughts.

Taru's influence

Some photos, and their accompanying narratives, directly alluded to *Taru's* influence on the participants. In their photos, participants found a way to represent several of Taru's themes, as well as the attributes of some of its key characters. For instance,

Kumkum (18 years, Abirpur village) took a picture of a daughter-in-law combing the hair of her mother-in-law, noting: 'In Taru, Neha is showed taking care of her mother-in-law. Similarly, in this picture, a daughter-in law is taking care of her mother-in law. So I wanted to show the love these two have for each other through this picture.' Shailendra Singh (44 years, Kamtaul village) took a photo of a dalit community worker and noted: 'He stays in the lower caste neighbourhood (harijan basti). Like Loni baba in *Taru*, he too protests against the disruptive elements in society.'

Some photos emphasized the theme of intercaste harmony, a major issue in Taru. Manjeet (19 years, Abirpur village), a high caste participant, asked a friend to take his photo with a dalit and provided the following narrative: 'This person is from a lower caste. We shouldn't have any discrimination because of caste. Even in the past we were trying to overcome the caste issue but after *Taru* program caste discrimination [in our village] is on a decline.

Mukesh's (22 years, Abirpur village) photo of two girls helping each other to ride a bicycle, emphasized the gender equality message of Taru, including certain changes in young women's behaviours in his Abirpur Village. As he noted: 'These girls are trying to learn to ride a bike. After listening to *Taru*, girls are changing. Listening to radio these girls learn new ideas. It doesn't have to be because of *Taru*, but they are influenced by something new.

Conclusion

Our experience with using participatory photography as a way to understand the world of audience members yielded rich insights. Our participants provided insights into how their engagement with a popular, entertaining, and educational text resonated with their lived experiences, and how it helped them voice certain narratives that were previously marginalized, silenced, overlooked, or rejected. The photograph's narrative, in some cases, called for wider community discussion, mobilization, and action.

For visuals to become truly participatory, at least in the Freirean sense, it is important that the participants not just take the photos and share their stories with the researcher (as was the case in the present project), but also share their stories with other community members, concerned citizens, and policymakers. We recommend that for participatory photography interventions, instead of just asking participants to take photos and then have them tell stories about those photos, participants share photos and their narratives with other community members to further gauge the commonality and differences of their meanings and interpretations. These community discussion sites can then also serve as a catalyst for community decisions and actions (Carlson, Engebretson and Chamberlain 2006).

Sharing pictures among community members can serve other useful functions as well. In our present research in Bihar, when Mukesh (22 years, Abirpur village) was describing a photo that he took, the young girls around him (who overheard his

narration) challenged him and made him own up that he was simply making up a story which he didn't believe in. Thus, collective sharing also would enhance the validity of the findings.

Sharing pictures with policy makers and other concerned citizens (outside the community) is important, as well. Consider the case of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association), a union of more than 250,000 women members, headquartered in Ahmedabad, India, which uses participatory video to bringing issues to the attention of policy-makers. In the early 1980s, SEWA used participatory video with women vegetable vendors of Manekchowk[4], who for three generations sold vegetables on the sidewalks of the Manekchowk market. With the increasing growth of Ahmedabad city, the municipal authorities of Ahmedabad considered the women vegetable vendors to be a nuisance and legal action was taken against them in 1985. The vegetable-sellers' illegality provided the local police with an opportunity to demand bribes and to harass these women.

In response to this threat, the vegetable vendors were organized by SEWA, who filed a suit with the Indian Supreme Court to protest the municipal action. The Supreme Court directed the municipal government to provide an alternative space for the vendors. SEWA videotaped a meeting held to inform the vegetable vendors of the municipality's proposal for an alternative space for them.

The municipal proposal met varied reactions. Some women were skeptical about the honesty of the municipal authorities. Some felt that SEWA would face strong political pressures if they accepted the municipality's proposal. Other women felt that no price was too high if they could escape police harassment. The women of the Manekchowk market showed emotion, enthusiasm, and rational logic as they discussed their problem and various solutions.

The next morning, the General Secretary of SEWA, Ela Bhatt, invited the Municipal Commissioner to watch the videotape. He viewed the agitated faces of the women and better understood their fear of the police, their distrust of the municipality, and their sense of solidarity. He empathized with the women of Manekchowk and their problems. As a result, the proposal for an alternative space for the vegetable-sellers was dropped. So, participatory visuals, in the form of photographs or video, have the potential to bridge the gap between citizens and policy-makers.

In this respect, participatory photography sits at the interface of theory, method, and praxis (see also Morphy and Banks 1997). A methodological tool in practice cannot be theoretically neutral since it is aligned with the objectives of the research and privileges the researchers' biases. In taking stock of the sociology of visuals – whether in the form of photos or as video – it is not difficult to discern the obvious conclusion: Almost all photos and videos are taken by 'the powerful, the established, the male, the colonizer' to 'portray the less powerful, less established, female, and colonized' (Harper 1994, 408). We advocate handing over the means of visual production to the oppressed, the silent, and the muted. While recognizing that visuals allow the 'oppressed' to make statements that are not possible by words,

we should also remember that all photographs, or video clips, are socially and technically constructed (Harper 1994). Photography and videography is, by its very nature, more 'active' and 'intrusive' than simple observation (i.e., methodological 'representation' to build theory). The visual act, by itself, is praxis, shaping and changing that which is being documented. For example, our analysis indicates that participants, through photography, opened for critique those seemingly 'natural', common-sense assumptions that take on hegemonic status in social, political, and economic structures.

Our analysis illustrates how images, as captured and narrated by participants, are ideological constructions that shape (and are shaped by) cultural and social environments. How images, as embodiments of personal and societal narratives, are incorporated within cultural processes and influence the trajectory of socio-cultural systems merits further attention. Specifically, our future research goals are to analyze the properties of visual systems, understand conditions of their interpretation, and connect visual systems to complexities of the social and political processes of which they are a part. At the same time, we hope to foreground the absence, or invisibility, of particular characters, scenes, etc., within visual imagery that are as crucial to interpretation as 'presence'.

We believe that visual images reveal and evoke the experience of the habitual or routinized nature of social behaviour – that is, how the world is seen, felt, and understood by participants. Visual understanding, what we see and how we interpret it, is an important part of the way we exist as humans in the world, and should be treated as such by scholars-practitioners.

Notes

2   Singhal and Harter are professors in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. Chitnis (Ph.D., Ohio University) works with UNICEF New York, and Sharma (Ph.D. Ohio University) is assistant professor at Cal State University, Fresno. Please direct all editorial correspondence to Arvind Singhal, School of Communication Studies, Lasher

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3   This section draws upon Singhal (2004).

4   This case draws upon Singhal and Rogers (1989).

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