WHEN A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS USING IMAGE-BASED RESEARCH METHODS IN VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AS A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE APPROACH

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Image-based approaches –visual story-telling, photo-elicitation method, photo-walking, visual auto-ethnography– have been utilized as a novel exploratory tool in psychology and social science for examining visual identities, life histories, and other collective elements of local cultures. Visual and image-based methodologies held significant promise for building bottom-up participatory research designs for inquiries, particularly on vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals and groups. However, due to methodological difficulties, image-based research has maintained a restricted standing within the 'traditional' word-based oriented landscape of qualitative paradigms. The terrain addressed by the current paper includes various applications of image-based techniques as applied in vulnerable groups, as determined by some examples of recent literature. The key findings indicated an original galaxy of empirically based methodologies that may be utilized to incorporate more 'traditional' quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method designs. Finally, implications from the practical application of this methodological design were discussed, notably in terms of decolonization of research techniques and ethical issues to guide practitioners' research in challenging circumstances and vulnerable people.

INTRODUCTION

Image-based techniques have long been acknowledged in psychology as an exploratory tool for assessing visual identities, life histories, and other collective artifacts arising from local cultures (Reavey & Brown, 2021; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). Visual storytelling, photo-elicitation, photo-walking, visual auto-ethnography, and other approaches that employ visual elements as a stimulus for participants have been used in social science fields such as sociology, education, political science, and anthropology for decades. The concept that visual may record lived experiences as they emerge as part of our greater human ecology can be traced back to the theoretical stance for employing pictures as data of knowledge (Brown & Reavey, 2015). As researchers, we must combine image-based research methodologies into more traditional 'orthodox' quantitative –e.g., survey, test, questionnaire– and qualitative –e.g., interviews, focus groups– inquiry procedures in response to social upheaval and the learning of new languages. The photograph, according to Collier (1957), may change life into "new, objective, and striking dimensions, and can encourage the informant to discuss the world around him as though viewing it for the first time, independent of personal experience with the materials" (p. 859). Furthermore, the use of images in research has a scientific justification: the regions of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than those that handle verbal information (Harper, 2002). Consequently "images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words" (p. 13). In this way, visual approaches enrich data by uncovering extra levels of meaning, giving legitimacy and depth to the process of knowledge creation (Glaw et al., 2017).

The present paper reflects on using image-based research methods as a basis for considering various methodological challenges and strategies associated with conducting visual

research as a culturally sensitive approach, especially with vulnerable populations and children. Even though the highly participatory and practical nature of visual methods appears to indicate their use with young children in child-centered research designs, it is important to test the assumption that visual methods are a natural or best method for engaging young children with the research process (Christensen & James, 2008). In the first part, using literature review devoted to image-based study, it will be discussed that the method is thought to have four specific features:

a. visual materials provide the stimuli for 'deep' interviews;
b. the method favors the inclusion of different types of information within other social science techniques;
c. it addresses the topic of power relations between researcher and subject;
d. it promotes bottom-up participatory approaches to research.

The second part of the paper, which builds on the literature on visual approaches, argues that image-based research methods have a lot of potential in the psychological sector. Such strategies, especially when working with vulnerable persons and children, may increase target population involvement by taking a more culturally sensitive approach based on bottom-up participatory approaches. Finally, the practical implications of this methodological design were discussed, notably in terms of decolonization of research techniques and ethical considerations to guide practitioners' research in difficult circumstances and vulnerable populations.

IMAGE-BASED RESEARCH: A BRIEF REVIEW OF METHODS

For a long time, images have marked numerous sociological and ethnographic study pieces. Over the last twenty-five years, visual research in the social sciences has increased substantially, with an increasing emphasis on the relevance of culture and cultural practices in defining the sense of

human experience (Pink, 2007; Prosser, 2006). Psychology has largely restricted the use of pictures with youngsters and other target populations that are less 'able' to express their ideas and feelings (Reavey, 2012). In this respect, the 'visual' status has frequently been considered as a more naive or unsophisticated method of communication, an alternative to more complex expressive modalities – e.g., language or quantitative evaluation.

The photo-elicitation method developed by Collier (1957) is one of the earliest known attempts to employ images in the context of social science research. It is used in the anthropological discipline. The photo-elicitation approach may be defined as the use of visual stimuli –e.g., photographs, paintings, drawings, or other visual materials– during face-to-face interviews to elicit responses. The primary motivations for adopting such materials in a research context were:

a. producing more detailed replies;
b. expanding the conversation;
c. encouraging spontaneous emerging ideas.

Photo elicitation validated the pictures' polysemic characteristics, putting them at the forefront of a study agenda (Harper, 2002).

The photolanguage approach was a methodology for employing images in psychological research that was similar to the photo-elicitation method (Bessell et al., 2007). Photolanguage is a type of communication intended to allow personal expression and engagement in small groups (Burton & Cooney, 1986). The approach employs black-and-white photographs chosen by the researcher to elicit group reflections and activate memory, emotions, and prior experiences. In the realm of counseling and therapy, photo language methods were widely employed (Caputo et al., 2020; Freire, 1970; Musetti de Schelotto et al., 2012; Rogers, 1986).

The photovoice technique (Wang & Burris, 1997) is a type of visual media photography in which participants take on the role of researcher, generating and interpreting photos with the goal of exposing deeper understandings of their

values and views (Beazley, 2008). Although the concepts of photolanguage and photovoice may overlap, there are substantial distinctions, with the former employing pre-selected shots and the latter placing cameras to the hands of participants and treating them as recorders (Lopez et al., 2005). According to Ruby (1991), photovoice offers the opportunity to perceive the world from the viewpoint of the people "who lead lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world" (p. 50). In addition, the technique requires a deep engagement of participants, particularly those from marginalized and vulnerable sectors of society (Wang & Burris, 1994).

Another intriguing form of image-based research approach is auto-photography. The practice, also known as self-directed photography (Johnsen et al., 2008), began with Ziller's work (1990) with a group of Navajo Indians who were asked to shoot photographs depicting how they regarded themselves. In reality, during auto-photography, participants photograph their surroundings, "choosing pictures and representations of themselves" (Noland, 2006, p. 2) in an attempt to perceive the world through the eyes of someone else. Interestingly, Thomas (2009) noted that when participants take a photograph as part of a study process, they tend to make deliberate selections about how they wish to portray themselves in the visual situations.

To conclude this brief and insufficiently conclusive review of image-based methods in the field of social science, it should be noted that the increasing use of such data collection methods stems from the realization that more traditional methods –e.g., interviews and questionnaires– create frames within which knowledge is already structured (Walker, 1993). On the contrary, bottom-up methodologies avoid influencing the form and content of participants' narratives in ways that might potentially improve the quality and depth of data obtained. In relation to research with children, their perception and experience of the world, as well as their communication styles, differ from those of adults,

demanding a distinct approach (Thomas & O'Kane 1998). Visual techniques enrich data by recognizing and breaking down power and status imbalances between the researcher and the participant. Adults may assist younger children establish this relationship by boosting rapport building, allowing expression of emotions and tacit knowledge –the unsaid and unexpressed– and fostering contemplation (Pain, 2012). According to Goldman-Segall (2014), there is the need to build a culture for shared collaborative authorship and dispersed co-construction of meaning.

IMAGE-BASED METHODS AS A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE APPROACH WITH CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

As societies change, research techniques in psychology must focus on the power imbalance that is characteristic of inquiry and the researcher-participant dynamics. Social science is vulnerable to the active involvement of the observer in making sense of experience, as well as processes of human interpretation and meaning-creation (Miller, 2004). According to this viewpoint, image-based methodologies provided methodological options for increasing the cultural sensitivity of the research process, strengthening understanding of the issue under consideration, and ensuring the ecological validity of conclusions. Because of the possibility to employ bottom-up and participatory methodologies, the use of images as a source of data looked to be especially important with research on vulnerable groups. This part of the article concludes with some examples of image-based strategies used with vulnerable groups and children. For instance, distinct research contexts will be presented: rural populations in South Africa and youngsters living in both community settings and low-warfare situations. Mitchell and De Lange (2011) undertook a participatory intervention called *Izindaba Yethu-Our Stories* in a rural

community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The project's goal was to create awareness about some community social challenges and to engage communities in seeking solutions to real problems. The interactive approach began with a one-day video-making class and proceeded over many months with follow-up viewings, small group talks, and community screenings. Finally, the composite video was shown to a larger audience for watching and participation in the rural community. Nonetheless, given the South African context, it is worthwhile to notice the work titled *What can a woman do with a camera? Turning the female gaze on poverty and HIV and AIDS in rural South Africa* (Moletsane et al., 2009). The study provided the chance to create a three minute movie realized by women and including instructors, learners, community healthcare workers, and parents within the framework of feminist visual culture and the notion of the female gaze.

Benninger and Savahl (2016) did an intriguing study in Cape Town –South Africa– on how children organise and attribute meaning to the notion of 'self'. The authors employed a participative strategy based on photovoice and community maps with youngsters aged 9 to 12 in this example. The findings revealed that feelings of safety, social connection, and children's spaces were important in how participants built and attributed meaning to the 'self'.

The number of research in the setting of low-intensity warfare –particularly with children– was quite limited, possibly due to both ethical concerns and the difficult circumstances that characterize the field. Despite the limited presence of studies with children living in war contexts or low-intensity conflict areas, more recently several works that have used visual material to elicit young children's responses can be found in the literature. Childhood researchers are increasingly arguing for a shift from research on children to research with children – study that seeks and values children's experiences and understandings (Mayall, 2008). Recognizing the importance of study with children in childhood research has resulted in a surge of interest in child-centered research paradigms that

prioritize children's perspectives and experiences. Kanji (2009) conducted an intriguing study with Afghan refugee children on how they characterize their day-to-day lives in the aftermath of conflict. The author employed hermeneutic photography to obtain data from photographs of the children's choosing. Finally, a conversational technique was employed to explore the images and discover emergent themes. Cavazzoni (2020) performed the second example of image-based research with children living in a conflict setting with Palestinian youngsters living in refugee camps. The approaches used in this case were mostly centered on the use of drawings, maps, and photo walking with youngsters to explore their feeling of agency.

Another recent work was conducted by Shaw (2020) with children from three different schools in the United Kingdom on the topic of defining inclusion directly from children voices. The research involved several children aged four to five years: 40 of them using photo-elicitation and 16 employing photo-voice. The results demonstrate that younger children are capable of expressing their comprehension and experience of their life; they simply communicate differently than adults. They show how visual methodologies can allow children to express emotions; provide the researcher with tacit knowledge – via relationship and rapport building during the six-week data collection period; and encourage them to reflect on images and responses through gentle questioning.

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Images, photos, drawings, paintings, videos, and other pictographic materials are powerful forms of communication that hold significant pieces of our personal experiences: people we have loved and lost, happy and sad memories, fragments of shared history, but also emotions, representations, and other cognitive processes. Adoption of image-based research methodologies seemed especially relevant at a time when our societies looked to be heading toward the so-called 'realm of

visual' (Freitag, 2002). Lee (2016) stated that modern societies are characterized by a ravenous demand for documenting the visual, with 1.5 trillion images expected to be taken in 2020. The visual environment evolved into a "place where seeing and knowing may be challenged, improved, and re-worked. As new media have been added to the realm, new possibilities for interactions, cross-influences, and additional participants have opened up" (p. 366).

Image-based research may be placed within the framework of multi-modal communication (Higham & Hebets, 2013), a viewpoint that includes many sorts of psychological activities, environmental settings, and cultural artifacts. Multi-modality, from a methodological standpoint, provides the chance to appreciate the intricate interplay between multiple sources of meaning-making that are part of our human experience. Adopting a multi-modal approach entails incorporating visual resources –pictures, drawings, painting, etc.– into more traditional research methodologies in order to investigate psychological elements and the process of meaning-making in relation to events and the locations in which it arises. Some final thoughts about research ethics and methodological issues should be considered at the end of this brief and inconclusive excursus on the image-based research approach. First, as Bird Rose (2008) stated, research ethics, particularly anonymity, are fundamental in visual approaches, as reflexivity is a key aspect of image-based methods. Working with visual approaches, data analysis was about exploring the link between the visual and the social and cultural settings of knowledge creation rather than turning "visual evidence" into "verbal knowledge" (Pink, 2001, p. 96). Second, methodologically, age-based research methodologies have remained underutilized in the 'traditional' qualitative and quantitative communities. Silverman emphasized in 1993 that the use of pictures involves difficult theoretical and methodological concerns. Some of the concerns remained unaddressed after 30 years. However, the incorporation of the image-based method in a more traditional qualitative

or quantitative process should be encouraged because it can provide an opportunity to shift from participant narratives to how participants reproduced their knowledge, particularly in research processes based on participatory culturally sensitive bottom-up approaches involving vulnerable populations. Finally, image-based approaches were used to solve the issue of particular local characteristics (Culturally Sensitive Approaches; Hwgan, 2009). This is done to prevent, as far as possible, the risk of utilizing rules of behavior and intervention forced from on high, with the unavoidable result of prescribing forms of power exercise, more or less conscious, in terms of hierarchical cultural imposition. According to Clemente and Higgins (2010), it is not so much –or only– a matter of selecting methods of inquiry that are compatible and applicable to a specific cultural context, but of reflecting on the issue that such methods "must be designed in order to de-colonize the system of power and control in favor of knowledge production" (p. 188).

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