The SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Methods

Metadata Sheet

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Respondent-generated image production (RGIP) is an increasingly popular and effective visual data production method that comes in different forms and in different combinations with other approaches that are often grouped under the nomer 'visual participatory research' or 'collaborative methods' (Pauwels, 2010, 2015). Basically, the RGIP method involves asking respondents to produce visual output (e.g., photographs, video, drawings, installations), which is connected to a specific research question or interest. Typically these assignments will be phrased in fairly general terms and usually relate to the immediate world and experiences of the respondent (e.g., 'depict the aspects of your neighborhood that have a special meaning to you', or 'make photographs of what you like and what you dislike about your present situation'). The central premise of this approach is that the resulting visual products will contain and communicate essential traits of the respondent culture and experience, including things that are sometimes hard to put into words for various reasons. These visual products are then further analysed by the researcher, often in conjunction with the makers.

This entry first introduces the basic traits of RGIP. It then moves on to differentiate scholarly and more activist uses of RGIP like photovoice and community video. Next, auto-driven photo elicitation is discussed as a merger of RGIP with another popular visual method, called photo

elicitation. Finally, RGIP is examined as part of the broader domain of visual participatory research methods.

RGIP: Acquiring and Processing Visual Responses From the Field

The central premise of RGIP is the idea that significant patterns of the respondent's culture (e.g., norms, values, expectations) may reside in both the form and the content of visual images and artefacts that are being produced at the explicit request of researchers. Research subjects thus are prompted to 'respond in visuals' to a researcher's assignment. Therefore, respondent-generated images should not be confused with user-generated (visual) content (e.g., visuals that are spontaneously shared on social media), which is being produced outside a specific research context or community project.

RGIP as a form of visual feedback typically has little structure, largely because the researcher should exercise only limited control over the manner in which certain aspects are portrayed. The fact that the influence of the researcher should be restricted to a minimum is a basic tenet of this approach (though the amount and nature of the guidance may vary according to the pursued research question and the specific assignment). Still, the question remains to what extent one can prevent, even in the teaching of the most elementary techniques for the production of camera images, that the cultural outlook (or, in this case, 'bias') of the researcher affects or disrupts the visual cultural practice of the group studied. This bias may manifest itself in specific choices with regard to filmic parameters (e.g., framing, duration and structure of recordings, selection of topics). Although this issue does not necessarily compromise the applicability of the technique, researchers clearly must be wary of moments when they might inadvertently influence the research process (e.g., by transferring aspects of their visuality), and try to assess their exact scope and effects. The visual outcome of a RGIP project—

even when resulting in a complete film or photo series—is not a scientific end product (but in fact just 'data') and researchers who work with such materials are left with the difficult task of meticulously analyzing the images for both significant content and style (as cultural patterns may reside in both).

One of the pioneering RGIP studies is *Through Navajo Eyes* by Sol Worth and John Adair (1972). These two researchers taught a number of Navajo Indians to operate a 16mm camera. In an amazingly brief period of time, the Navajo succeeded in making a series of compelling short films about aspects of their culture that revealed both in form and content very culturally specific patterns. The researchers noticed, for example, in a film on the activities of a silversmith that the Navajo filmmakers used a significant amount of footage to record people who were moving from one place to another, in order to find the 'right wood' for making a fire. Only after a while did the researchers find out that being 'underway' also plays an important role in Navajo songs, poems, and everyday language. Moving from one place to another is considered a significant event in itself, and not just as a means to an end (Worth & Adair, 1972). In contrast, Western filmmakers tend to work more 'elliptically'; they usually try to shorten the process by leaving out any moments that are perceived to be unimportant or repetitious, and are more focused on the end result. It is clear that RGIP researchers need to be well-informed about the broader culture of the respondents to be able to adequately decode the meanings of the depicted objects and situations, as well as the way they have been visualized and organized.

Respondent-generated image production not only comprises the use of camera-based images, depicting aspects of the respondent's material world, but also includes a variety of drawing methods and techniques whereby the respondent may be prompted to give a concrete shape to more internal processes and views. 'Mental mapping' is one such technique to bring about a person's perception of an area of interaction (e.g., which parts in a city are important or used by the respondent, how individuals give sense to a place) or a complex situation. Drawings may reveal the unspeakable or indescribable, but also things of which the producer is not fully aware. Psychotherapist Gertraud Diem-Wille believes that 'pictures, drawings and metaphors show a person's emotional state of mind much

better than verbal definitions or descriptions' (Diem-Wille, 2001, p. 119) and uses projective drawing techniques mainly as a means to overcome inhibitions and self-censoring mechanisms that tend to occur routinely in purely verbal exchanges with the therapist.

Another interesting RGIP variant is 'sandboxing' (Mannay, Staples, & Edwards, 2017), whereby participants produce three-dimensional scenes in sand trays using a variety of small everyday objects and miniature figures that may be chosen from and combined to express their 'materialized' view on a matter (e.g., how they feel in a certain problematic situation). Again, most of the time an interview with the makers will have to follow to further disclose their intentions.

RGIP products may put aspects of the broader culture of the respondent into the spotlights—keeping the image maker literally 'out of sight'—or take a more autobiographical stance. When respondents choose to depict aspects of their own intimate life they sometimes have to rely on another person (from their environment) to take pictures where they figure in themselves, but most often this is done according to explicit instructions by the respondent and therefor still qualifies as respondent-generated image making.

Activist Modes of RGIP: Photovoice and Community Video

RGIP as a method comes in many shapes and characterizations. Among the most popular used terms are *photovoice* (Wang, 1999), *community video*, and *participatory video* (Mitchell & de Lange, 2011). Indeed, the basic technique of these approaches is similar to what is described previously: handing out (still or moving) picture-making devices to people and giving them a limited number of guidelines to depict aspects and events of their world.

Whereas the purpose of RGIP in a research project is primarily to acquire unique data about the respondents' world (their visualized experiences and environment as an entry point to their culture) and thus to generate scientific knowledge, the primary aim of many photovoice and community video

projects is to initiate a positive change in the world of the participants, ideally by raising awareness of a problem in a community, empowering community members or marginalized individuals, or by trying to exert influence on authorities or policymakers to improve a problematic situation.

The role of the 'project instigator' in photovoice or community video activities is mainly to organize/facilitate, provide the means (expertise and materials), and make sure that the social activist message is brought across through publications, exhibitions, public meetings, and any combination of these. The end product (e.g., a book, exhibition, video program) is often not a social scientific contribution as such, though it might very well provide valuable data for further study, as it potentially generates new 'local' or practice-based knowledge and insights.

A number of projects that explicitly use the term *photovoice* to characterize their approach do so in a way that fully complies with respondent-generated production as a research method (e.g., Laura Lorenz's (2010) work on patients with brain injuries). However, more often the main goal of photovoice projects is social action rather than (strictly scientific) knowledge production, though these distinct options need not exclude one another. Often participatory action projects also provide a rich and unique (and largely untapped) source of data on community development and on grassroots expression.

For photovoice activities to be considered a research method (or a contemporary variant of RGIP) they would need to be grounded in and guided by one or more research disciplines (e.g., sociology, health science, education). These perspectives would similarly require careful analysis of the visual (or multimodal) data as expressions of particular views and experiences of the participants. Visual products should not be taken at face value or considered self-evident. However, photovoice and other participatory approaches are often characterized and advocated by their intended outcome, and lack both empirical evidence and methodologies for arriving at that outcome, including criteria and indicators to evaluate whether ambitious claims and intentions have been realized.

For example, the *www.photovoiceworldwide.com* website boldly asserts that photovoice:

Strengthens writing and communications skills; Empowers people, families,

and communities; Awakens appreciation for different points of view; Strengthens

positive relations (between e.g. young adolescences, parents, community, etc.);

Increases civic involvement; Fosters family and community dialog; Develops

teamwork; Gives participants a voice in their community; Raises awareness of

resources and problems; Creates powerful visual facts for fundraising and

sponsorship; Has wide impact for low cost; Establishes partnerships for community

change.

These are well-intentioned and praiseworthy claims, but they only refer to *possible* outcomes and *desired* effects, not to essential features or definite effects of handing out cameras (or other visual devices) to people, facilitating group processes, and disseminating the results. Making pictures may be a valuable part of a process to improve the situation of under-represented or marginalized people, but there is nothing intrinsically or automatically empowering in using pictures. It is certainly one way to get a message across and a process that can yield new experiences with the participants, but so can writing stories or organizing debates or protests. The literature on participatory visual methods is replete with similar idealistic and celebratory accounts of photovoice and related participatory approaches, and most often little guidance is offered on to how to realize these distinct aspects.

A distinction needs to be made between offering participants or respondents a voice in the research process (for ethical or scientific reasons) while retaining the basic researcher's commitment to knowledge production (of fundamental or more applied nature), and helping groups to have an immediate and tangible impact on their environment. Projects should try to be clear about this and adopt a reflexive and self-critical attitude: what are the real benefits or outcomes of this project and who ultimately stands to gain? Moreover, 'giving voice through visuals' only to some people on some topics and in some ways or formats does not ensure adequate coverage of the 'emic' perspective (i.e. the viewpoint of the subject or the 'insider') or to the variety of views and concerns that may exist in

the selected communities (in a social activist perspective).

Some scholars and practitioners have begun to question the assumption that providing visual media opportunities (e.g., cameras, editing tools, exhibition space) to groups of people automatically gives them a voice that will be heard and acted upon. They are also challenging the related assumption that pictures are self-evident and need no further elaboration, framing, or analysis (Chalfen, Sherman, & Rich, 2010). Whether photographic projects really help individuals, groups, or communities to obtain a voice are empirical questions that need to be asked and answered on a case-by-case basis. A critical evaluation of the real effects or impact is needed, both for the people involved and to fine-tune the method for future use.

RGIP as a Component of Auto-Driven or Respondent-Controlled Photo Elicitation

Images produced by the field in response to an assignment of a researcher usually are not self-explanatory and require further elucidation by their makers. Researchers may most of the time see *what* is depicted, but they rarely know *why* exactly something is chosen by the respondents and what it means to them. So often respondent-generated images will need to be commented upon by their makers, which means that this research approach generates visual and verbal data, both of which are important to the researcher.

Today this combination of respondent-produced and subsequently commented upon imagery is being indicated with different terms such as *auto-driven photo elicitation* (Clark, 1999) or *respondent-controlled photo elicitation* (Padgett et al., 2013). Both terms are somewhat ambiguous because they seem to refer primarily to another, very distinct visual method. Using images as visual stimuli in an interview (photo elicitation or visual elicitation in more generic terms; Pauwels, 2015) and asking respondents to visually represent or express aspects of their life (RGIP) are distinct research

techniques, but these often have been combined with good results. Many visual scholars tend to confuse these two visual methods, therefore a short introduction of photo elicitation is needed here to be able to explain why auto-driven photo elicitation or respondent-controlled photo elicitation are somewhat confusing labels.

The technique whereby images are used as a stimulus in the context of an interview was originally applied in psychological research. It was subsequently adopted by a number of social scientists and is now primarily known as photo-elicitation though many types of images can be used (e.g., still and moving, paintings or drawings) and thus *image-elicitation* or *visual elicitation* would be a more appropriate term. The visual materials used as stimuli to obtain unique kinds of information from respondents and informants may include pre-existing societal imagery (e.g., historic or archive pictures, advertisements, art works), as well as researcher-produced or respondent-generated materials. The confrontation of the interviewee (or multiple respondents in a focus group situation) with the reality of (camera) images can provide two kinds of information for the researcher. First, the interview with visual materials can offer the researcher a fairly simple and quick way of acquiring information about whatever is visible in the image. A properly informed respondent can often tell accurately who or what has or has not been captured by the images, which actions are being performed, and what the significance is of certain signs and symbols. The purpose of the interview with photo or film elicitation is, however, not restricted to the collection or explanation of a series of concrete facts about whatever has been recorded. The technique also allows one to elicit or trigger deeper, more abstract perceptions and values of respondents. Carefully chosen visual material of a photographic or non-photographic nature (e.g., prints, drawings) combined with a good interview technique can broaden the interview from an information session about what has been recorded to a data collection session about the significance of the recorded material to the respondent. Thus, the focus of attention shifts from external manifestations to an experience, to an 'interior' perspective, as it were. Using visuals as interview stimuli yields verbal feedback or data that needs to be further analyzed in much the same way as

responses captured during open (verbal) interviews and focus groups.

Compared to the purely verbal interview, the visual interview offers a number of specific benefits. While researchers may find it difficult to convince their respondents to participate in interviews, visual materials can often serve as a door opener. They provide a type of structure to the interview that is usually not experienced by the respondent as annoying or provocative. While the verbal interview is often characterized by a typical role differentiation between interviewer and interviewee, this relationship can assume an entirely different form in the visual interview. Rather than being pushed into the role of the person who is being questioned, the respondents take on the role of an expert. When commenting on images, interviewees tend to feel much less as if they are talking about things they should not be talking about. Instead, they feel as if they are simply explaining things that have already been captured by the recording. The visual material therefore often evokes spontaneous and unpredictable answers from respondents.

John Collier (1967) found that purely verbal interviews tend to become unproductive much more quickly than interviews with visual stimuli. If new images are constantly made available, then the respondent's attention and interest can be retained for longer periods of time. Irrelevant digressions on the part of the respondent can be elegantly prevented by providing a new image that focuses attention on a new fact. Visual material thus jolts the memory of the respondents, who will tend to become more easily irritated during a purely verbal interview because of the lack of interesting new stimuli from the researcher and through the confrontation with the failure of their own memory (Collier, 1967).

However, visual materials can also disrupt or distort the research process by being irrelevant to the issue studied, by being ill-adapted to the respondent, or by creating an all-too suggestive, one-sided, or incomplete picture of the phenomenon or event considered. While the technique may seem simple and straightforward, the visual interviewers are expected to be familiar with the visual material used, the manner in which it was obtained, and its projective potential. A solid knowledge of the respondents' culture and their particular cultural sensitivities are needed.

Having explained the fundamental traits of RGIP and visual elicitation, it may now become clear why *auto-driven* or *respondent-controlled* photo elicitation, contrary to what the terms seem to suggest, is more a variant of RGIP (whereby respondents produce *visual* feedback) than of photo elicitation or visual elicitation (whereby respondents produce *verbal* feedback). It is a form of photo-elicitation, to the extent that (respondent-generated) images are used to generate verbal feedback. But then most, if not all, RGIP projects necessitate the verbal input of respondents to help make sense of the visual outcome. However, the fact that in this case people are asked to respond to images that they themselves produced (instead of reacting to pictures they may never have seen before or might never take themselves) and that have been carefully selected by the researcher to address a certain problematic warrants further scrutiny. For it is clear that the respondent will perform a somewhat different expert role commenting on self-made images, compared to talking about unexpected images created or acquired by the researcher. Other (largely undocumented) peculiarities of auto-driven photo elicitation are the scopic limitation of the images, as they have typically been produced in a short period of time in a particular place (whereas images selected by the researcher can cover many decades and geographic locations), and the fact that the researcher has less control over the visual stimuli that are provided to the respondent (because these are created by the latter, they may not include details central to questions of interest to the researcher).

RGIP Application: Exploring Alternative Views of People With Down Syndrome

Ella Conard, a student who took a visual sociology and anthropology class taught by Luc Pauwels at the University of Antwerp in 2013 used the RGIP approach to explore how people with Down syndrome look at the world and at themselves (see Figures 1 and

2). Using both photography and drawing as media of expression, Conard tried to find out what her respondents valued in life and how they see and position themselves in it, by carefully looking at what they choose to depict and how exactly they choose to depict the subject matter. She also looked at the routines of producing the images and followed up by conducting interviews with all of the respondents about these practices and their visual outcome. In this respect, this RGIP example is also an illustration of auto-driven visual elicitation.

[Insert Respondent-Generated Image Production Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. Self-portrait of S. (left). When asked to draw a picture of himself, S. first puts his glasses on the paper, draws a contour of them and then fills in the rest, spending a lot of time and attention at getting the hair, face and body right. Arms and legs came last and received only minor consideration. (photo: courtesy of E. Conard)

[Insert Respondent-Generated Image Production Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. Depicting dangerous animals (right). When visiting the zoo, S. took no less than 136 photographs. Most shots were widely framed, showing the main subject from a great distance. In particular when depicting dangerous animals, like wolves, bears, and tigers, he would never zoom-in to bring them closer. When asked about it, he told Ella that one should never get too close to danger. This confounding of optical effect with physical distance illustrates the importance of taking into account both the subject matter and the formal qualities of a visual representation as sources of respondent-generated data. (photo: courtesy of E. Conard)

RGIP and Visual Participatory Research

RGIP, photovoice (its more activist mode, though both terms are in fact used interchangeably), and combinations of these methods with photo elicitation (such as the auto-driven photo elicitation approach) are often called 'participatory' visual methods or 'arts-based research', though the mere use of a visual medium does not necessarily qualify an artistic practice.

While most human studies involve some kind of interaction between the researcher and the researched, the methods covered in this entry involve the respondents or participants more actively than most established social science methods and techniques. So, while there may not be an essential difference, there may be at least one in degree. However, there is a need to better define the exact nature and degree of forms of participation or collaboration, and to look more closely at the wide variety of aims and beneficiaries of such forms of visual research. Moreover, the roles of respondents/participants and researchers/facilitators are not always so straightforward and distinct in visual participatory projects. In truly joint visual productions, researchers and the researched may act as partners who constantly shift or share roles. In auto-ethnographic accounts such as visual diaries kept by researchers (see Chaplin, 2011), they may even become completely mixed up because the researcher combines two roles, that of a visual analyst and that of research subject.

Visual participatory approaches represent an important strand of visual research with a growing number of practitioners from a diversity of disciplines and professional fields. Their specific attraction has to do with the idea that research should also benefit those who are subjected to it and thus that researchers should engage themselves in helping to solve problems of communities without thinking primarily about their own professional gains (the ethical motive). But these visual research practices are also firmly grounded in the view that involving respondents or community members more actively may generate unique types of data (the scientific motive). As such, participatory techniques seem to embody special opportunities to include the emic (insider) view in research as a necessary complement

to the dominant etic view (i.e. researcher or 'outsider' position), in an almost literal sense. Both are needed, as giving voice to people is not adequate on its own merits, while the absence of subjects' points of view leads to incomplete depictions and interpretations by scholars despite their sophisticated theoretical and methodological frameworks.

Visual participatory approaches, and in particular RGIP and photovoice, may contribute to redefining the human subjects of research from objects of inquiry to more active agents of knowledge building and social change. However, it is important to refrain from the customary celebratory and somewhat nebulous treatment of visual participatory approaches, and adopt instead a critical constructive stance necessary to realize the extensive ethical and epistemological potential of participatory visual research. So far it seems that more effort has been spent in inventing new terms for existing practices, and claiming ownership or preeminence of quite similar practices, than in explaining what these new or revised techniques really entail. In particular, the terms *photovoice*, *photo novella*, and *photo-elicitation* are used (sometimes even interchangeably) for a wide variety of research set-ups and outcomes. Some find it necessary to use different terms for every type of medium (*photovoice*, *filmvoice*, *videovoice*, *comicvoice*, *paintvoice*), but a more generic term like *visual voice*, *image voice*, or *picture voice* would be an improvement over the proliferation of new terms for similar and related practices.

Streamlining the terminology may help practitioners and newcomers to better comprehend the assumptions and implications of what they are trying to achieve. It would, for instance, be helpful to talk more consistently about RGIP to indicate the scholarly perspective with a prime focus on analysis and the production of knowledge about a social phenomenon. The term *participant-generated image production* (or possibly *photovoice*) could then be used to refer to more social activist projects geared primarily towards producing change (in, e.g., attitudes, beliefs, behavior, law) in the social world.

Whatever terms are finally agreed upon, a crucial step towards more methodological transparency and rigor is the recognition that a significant distinction needs to be made between

involving research subjects in the production of visual materials for scientific purposes on one hand, and, on the other hand, helping members produce images to improve an unfortunate situation. It is important to acknowledge that the RGIP approach may serve these two distinct purposes: scholarly knowledge production and social action (and awareness). These goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive (though in actual practice one usually seems to take precedence), but their different methodological implications do require separate and explicit attention. Respondent-generated visual materials cannot comprise, as such, a scientific end product. They need to be analyzed and framed within disciplinary methods and theory. Activist approaches of RGIP often lack this phase of analysis and disciplinary framing.

A more transparent and well-reasoned methodology is not just important for research purposes but also for non-academic projects, where some other criteria may apply but where generating some sort of knowledge, awareness, or insight among the community members and other stakeholders is also of vital importance. Responsibly executed participatory visual research involves managing the expectations of the respondents or participants by providing precise and realistic information about the process and the possible outcomes. As an action research or activist approach, it also involves following up the process and making some serious efforts to measure the intended and unintended social effects (both the internal or 'in-group' and external upshots) with the current and future well-being of those involved in mind.

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