



Smart Urban Intermediaries

Connecting people.
Changing communities.

Photovoice as a method of co-enquiry Working paper

09/10/2018



About the project

Smart Urban Intermediaries (SmartUrbI) is a collaborative research programme (2017-2019) co-led by Tilburg University, University of Edinburgh, University of Birmingham and Roskilde University. It is funded by JPI Urban Europe (P/693443) through NWO, Innovation Fund Denmark, and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ES/R002991/1).

SmartUrbI works with a wide range of public, third and community sector partners across the four countries. The purpose is to improve understanding and support for people who make a difference in urban neighbourhood (aka 'smart urban intermediaries'). The project entails collaboration across 'local labs' in Birmingham, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Glasgow. The labs are sites for co-inquiry between researchers and practitioners exploring barriers and enablers to smart urban development and social innovation. The project will also entail study visits to Portugal and Poland, and a final conference in Denmark in September 2019.

About this working paper

This working paper was co-written by the SmartUrbI team to inform the development of the research, and it's part of a series of papers that reflect on-going thinking rather than final project findings. Questions or comments can be sent to: smarturbi@gmail.com

About the research team

For more information about the project please see our website, where you can also subscribe to the newsletter: <http://smart-urban-intermediaries.com/>. Follow us on Twitter: [@Smart_Urb_I](https://twitter.com/Smart_Urb_I)



Photovoice as a method for co-enquiry

Rationale

This working paper considers the use of photovoice as a method for directly including the experiences and reflections of practitioners and enabling them to contribute as researchers to examining the boundary spanning practices of intermediaries. The techniques outlined here are drawn from a suite of methods associated with community-based participatory research. They treat the “participants as co-investigators” (Powers and Freedman, 2012) thus fitting in with our project’s model of co-production and its commitment to empowerment, inclusion and social change.

The proposal mentions photovoice, diaries and reflective writing, all designed to capture the experiences, thoughts and insights from the people we have identified as ‘smart urban intermediaries’ (SUIs) but without specifying how they will be implemented and how combined with the other fieldwork methods, namely shadowing and semi-structured interviews. After discussion it was decided not to proceed with reflective writing so this paper focuses solely on photovoice.

Photovoice is used essentially to promote reflection and dialogue, individually and collectively. It is a technique that enables intermediaries actively to generate and examine evidence from their own experience and to learn through their involvement in the project. As such it reflects a ‘strengths-based’ approach, that starts from the practitioners’/neighbourhood assets and encourages the practitioner-researchers to identify their own skills and those aspects of their work or communities that they take pride in.

Photovoice is not simply a means for recording experience, such as a factual diary or ‘unvoiced’ photos would provide. The critical feature of the approach is that it allows participants to choose what they want to share, including emotional content, and to some extent removes many of the constraints of formal data gathering. By being built into a medium term process, involving three ‘iterations’ of the fieldwork, punctuated by the group discussions at the Local and Transnational Labs, photovoice is making it possible to keep track of insights and changing opinions. In this respect, it contributes to an account of the learning journey for each participant, as well as complementing any parallel photos and research journals kept by members of the research team.

Literature review

Recent literature reviews for photovoice indicate a number of approaches and applications (e.g. Catalani and Minkler, 2010; Silver, 2017, unpublished). Photovoice is a relatively innovative method used in participatory action research with communities that are marginalised or who face other challenges, for example around literacy or influence. It was developed by Caroline Wang and her colleagues (Wang, 1999; Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang et al, 1998) as a way of ensuring that the views of end-users and citizens would be taken into

account in strategies for tackling some of the more intractable problems and 'wicked' issues that traditional services or official agents have failed to solve.

Sanon et al (2014) in their review of 30 studies using photovoice identify a three-pronged rationale for photovoice:

- record community strengths and issues;
- empower participants to express individual experiences through a shared platform, and
- develop critical reflection and dialogue

As such it is well-suited to our interest in social innovation.

According to Dan Silver's literature review (2017) "the photovoice process typically progresses through a number of stages described by Hergenrather et al (2009): The first stage tends to be based on identifying a community issue, followed by participant recruitment. Participants are trained in the photovoice method and use of cameras. Next, the group or leader identifies the photo assignment(s) or "photo-mission," which is followed by discussion of the photographs that are taken. The researchers analyse these photographs, either through interviewing participants about their photographs, or by qualitatively analysing writing produced about the photographs produced by participants. Typically, the photographs that participants capture are discussed or written about using the mnemonic of SHOWED (Catalani and Minkler, 2010). This includes the following questions:

- What do you (S)ee here?
- What is really (H)appening here?
- How does this relate to (O)ur lives?
- (W)hy does this concern, situation, strength exist?
- How can we become (E)mpowered through our new understanding?
- And, what can we (D)o?"

Photovoice is fairly simple to use, provided people have access to a smartphone or digital camera that they are willing to carry around with them during their everyday activities. It involves asking participants to take a series of pictures of things (places, people, encounters, occasions, objects, etc.) that have some significance to their thinking [and feelings] about the research topic, in our case, intermediary practices. The participants are then asked to present a selection of their photos in settings which promote conversation – for example, during follow-up interviews, group discussion or through some kind of interactive exhibition or digital platform.

The portfolio of photos could be generated through specific tasks (e.g. take a picture every day for a week, choose examples that illustrate your boundary-spanning role, take photos of the people who play crucial roles in your current networks or who help you to make things happen, and so on.) Some kind of log needs to be kept, which should include a note of where and when the photo was taken, who or what is depicted, and why it is meaningful to the researcher-practitioner.

Considerations

A series of photovoice exercises will give research access to experiences, insights and emotions in ways that allow rigour in terms of recording and analysis, though it is important to note that the photos themselves are not sources of evidence, rather it is the ways in which they are described and discussed. These complement and contribute to the data generated through shadowing/observations, network mapping and interviews, triangulating with one another to provide a robust foundation for further investigations and learning.

There are challenges for both photovoice and reflective writing relating to motivation, content parameters, sequencing, iteration and comparability. Who decides what gets recorded or included? Should the focus for these methods be on intermediation, social innovation or boundary-spanning incidents, or all three at once? At which points in the research journey should they be used and how do we keep the momentum going? How does the material generated help us to prepare for the Local and Transnational Labs, to capture the learning from these and to influence what happens in the next round of field work?

Summary of advantages and disadvantages of using photovoice

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Practitioners have maximum choice over data contributed. Easy to use, especially if people already accustomed to using smart phones to take pictures. Mitigates language or literacy problems. Provides rich basis for individual and group discussions</p>	<p>Significant encounters/intermediation may be embarrassing or awkward to photograph. Reluctance and forgetfulness for practitioners in using photovoice in everyday activities so set of photos is limited and do not capture the reality or frequency of intermediary practices. Potential ethical issues around reproduction and ownership</p>

Table 1.

Implementation

Photovoice was initially an unfamiliar technique for members of the research team and therefore created an opportunity for widening our methodological repertoire. We undertook some training in its use and this formed the basis for a practical guide that was shared with the SUIs. Choices were available regarding

the task set for the SUIs and how the photos are used to stimulate discussion and create new knowledge.

To date, photovoice has been used as part of the first two rounds of fieldwork and to record and reflect on visits to community projects during the first transnational lab in Glasgow. In the main SUIs have been prepared to use their own cameras or Smart phones, though some have been reluctant and others have needed a lot of reminding. The instructions for taking the photos was fairly open-ended (e.g. "Take photos of whatever you think capture aspects of your experience and practice that are relevant to the research project. They could be of people, places, occasions, encounters or objects that illustrate your role as an intermediary." The task may change through the different rounds of fieldwork?

As yet, we still need to develop systems and procedures for storing and using the photos and accompanying words. Some kind of log is needed to label each photo (date, place, people, significance, perhaps using a key word) so that the set of photos can be easily analysed and retrieved. In some cases the photos have been used to explore experiences through one-to-one conversations with the researcher or through presentations to the whole local team via local lab and transnational sessions.

There are cultural differences associated with people's willingness to be photographed, which may apply to both the SUIs and the people they work with. There are related ethical issues around confidentiality and anonymity which extend beyond the consent forms for the practitioner-researchers and may require permissions from those being photographed. This has sometimes made the process cumbersome and may have prevented the exploration of some interesting tensions or conflicts.

Nonetheless the feedback from the photovoice sessions has been positive. The method has encouraged some of practitioners to reflect in ways they have not previously found time for, and the exercise of sharing the photos with the rest of the group has stimulated some lively discussions about similarities across the SUIs from the four settings.

Role of the researchers

We have adopted a broadly similar approach in how we relate to the SUIs, bearing in mind that trust and mutual respect are crucial at every stage. We are asking a lot of the researcher-practitioners and will need to earn their commitment and continuing enthusiasm. The co-production ethos demands that we work alongside one another as equals but with different roles. Is our role mainly about facilitating, coaching and mentoring people in their learning and praxis development? And do we also have a responsibility to ensure that the data generated by the participants through photovoice and reflective recordings are of sufficient quantity and quality to create a robust foundation for analysis and meaningful conclusions that potentially apply across a range of Europe settings?

We, as external researchers, may therefore need to adopt a more objective role from time to time in order to achieve standards required for reliable and valid

qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). This shift from 'informal and friendly' to 'formal academic' with accountabilities to funders may be uncomfortable or unexpected for the SUIs and partners. However, our initial conversations with prospective practitioners and cooperation partners have been enthusiastic and reinforced the importance of building relationships of mutual respect and trust, while developing a shared commitment to the project's overall aims.

As researchers we have a duty of care towards the practitioners and need to be clear about how we will manage the margins of confidentiality and anonymity (Gubrium et al, 2014). This has implications for data management as well as ethics, notably how will the raw data be coded, stored and interpreted? How will participants be involved in the analyses and how will their contributions be credited?

Implications

The use of photovoice to capture and then examine examples from practice is fairly novel as a form of ethnography and as a means of revealing aspects of people's interactions. It has allowed us to be innovative in our methodology and discover new insights that can be evidenced through extracts from the descriptions and explanations generated by the SUIs themselves. It supports direct dialogue and debate between peers and has therefore created a good foundation for shared learning.

Photovoice offers a technique for accessing the unmediated experiences of practitioners, together with their interpretations of those experiences. By asking the SUIs to collaborate in analysing this raw data through interviews and group conversation, we are involving them in the co-production of knowledge, especially in the use of this evidence as groundwork for the Local Labs. The material gathered and then selected for further contemplation enables us to work together to filter through what is most significant for the practitioners and identify evidence that will address our research questions. In addition, we must ensure that these discussions influence successive rounds of fieldwork and shape the emerging findings.

Photovoice is here used as one strand in a mixed methods approach which is recognised as strengthening triangulation. It encourages 'thick' description of the research subject and their 'webs of significance' (cf Geertz, 1983) and when combined with the other, more collective, stages of analysis and deliberation, should enable robust processes of constructing new understandings, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research conclusions (Scanlon et al, 2002).

In particular, this method complements the participant-observer role of the researcher in shadowing and recording the intermediary activities, providing a counter-balance to possible biases and maybe prompting topics for joint discussion. As Stebbins (2009) has pointed out, it is vital that the field relationship between researcher and 'researchee' is based on a good rapport, founded on a commitment to mutual learning. With both parties possibly taking photos and making reflective recordings of the same incidents, the creation of and discussion

of shadow accounts could prove very illuminating in the subsequent interviews and Local Lab exercises (cf. Halliday et al, 2008).

Conclusions

The notion of the reflective practitioner underpins much of our approach so developing techniques to enhance practitioner reflections will result in a rich, vivid and deep body of data, hopefully capturing the tacit 'know-how' of intermediary practices alongside the felt tensions and dilemmas, which can form the basis for further dialogue. Intermediaries tend to occupy ambiguous positions and status, often choosing to operate at the edges of organisations, groups or communities. The value of their multi-faceted connections are not always recognised so photovoice is helping to make them both visible and to demonstrate their value.

Not all boundary-spanners are peripheral or in low status roles, however, and these can be especially significant when it comes to social innovation because they can open up access to resources and influence decision-makers. Photovoice, alongside the shadowing, is revealing how successful intermediaries are able to use their networks to create and diffuse innovation (Schön, 1983). In particular, the discussions stimulated by the practitioner produced material is enabling the project to understand the sometimes hidden significance of the practitioners being in touch with and listening to residents, entrepreneurs, service users and colleagues located in the target neighbourhoods.

The SmartUrbI research has an ethos of co-production, implying a respectful and equal relationship between the academic partners, civil society partners and practitioner participants.

The photovoice method described in this paper is primarily for use by practitioners to generate data from their own experience. Our methodology has to be pragmatic, in that we acknowledge and accommodate the pressures facing the practitioners in their busy lives, whilst enabling them to contribute as much as possible to the co-production of the evidence base. So far, the majority of the SUIs are enjoying taking and talking about photos that they have themselves taken, although significant numbers are not engaging with this approach at all or need regular reminders.

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