Ethnographic Strategies for Engaging Deaf Youth Participants: Photovoice and Participatory Analysis

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Abstract

Researchers across disciplines have looked to deaf individuals and communities to learn about many aspects of human experience, earning deaf people's unique biological and social status a subjugated position in scientific inquiry. All too often deaf people appear in the literature as research “subjects” rather than active, autonomous participants, or partner-researchers. My research investigated deaf youth identity in Mexico City, Mexico, with a focus on the emic perspectives of my adolescent participants and their families. My focus deaf epistemologies led me to photovoice for data collection and analysis. This article outlines the engagement of deaf youth participants through the participatory visual data collection method photovoice, which allowed me to achieve the goals of a community-based research design. This article explores the unique needs of deaf youth research participants and epistemological considerations for community-based work among deaf youth in Mexico City. I discuss innovative ethnographic results revealing deaf youth’s emic perspectives through participatory analysis.

Keywords: Deaf, Identity, Visual Methods, Photovoice, Community-Based Research

Introduction

Researchers across disciplines have looked to deaf individuals and communities to learn about many aspects of human experience, earning deaf people’s unique biological and social status a subjugated position in scientific inquiry. Deaf lifeways, organized without auditory input, have captured the investigative interest of social scientists, while deaf people’s language acquisition, cognition, social, and emotional development have intrigued educators as well as medical and psychological researchers. All too often, however, deaf people appear in the literature as research “subjects” rather than active, autonomous participants, or partner-researchers.

Anthropological research with deaf participants has focused on the history of deaf communities, emic perspectives of deaf people, and linguistic and socio-linguistic issues; yet despite these efforts, “anthropological studies of Deaf communities are still in a relatively early stage, akin to the early phases of Boasian descriptive
ethnography” (Senghas and Monaghan 2002:69-70). Ethnography, anthropology’s methodological hallmark, is a useful approach to research involving deaf participants. This article outlines the engagement of deaf youth participants through ethnographic strategies using the participatory visual data collection method photovoice.

My dissertation research investigated the experience of deafness in Mexico City, Mexico, with a focus on the emic perspectives of adolescent participants and their families. In order to “explore the cultural situatedness of Deaf identity” (LeMaster 2003:169), I chose photovoice, a data collection method that accommodated deaf youth’s visual learning styles, to maximize their participation. This article presents ethical and epistemological considerations for community-based work among deaf youth in Mexico City, Mexico, and provides examples highlighting the effectiveness of participatory analysis of photographic images.

Epistemological Approach and Methodological Framework

Ethnographic research, participatory by nature, seeks to understand the emic perspectives of participants. Yet, anthropology, like other sciences, has been accused of maintaining a “colonial attitude” in deaf research (Ladd 2005; De Clerck 2010) whereby “research subjects are reduced to objects, and indigenous knowledge of the informants is granted secondary status in the production of scientific knowledge about indigenous knowledge” (De Clerck 2010:436). To address this “colonial” critique in an ethnographic setting among deaf participants, my primary responsibilities as principal investigator included: the incorporation of deaf youth epistemologies, or “the first-hand knowledge of what it is like to be a member of the group” (Cooper 2007:565), the purposeful selection of research methods that actively involved deaf participants, and a commitment to on-going reflexivity.

Facilitating the involvement of youth participants called for special methodological and ethical considerations since two fundamental characteristics made this population particularly vulnerable: their hearing status and their status as children. Children and people with disabilities require extra protections when they become involved in research (Sudore 2006) since the sometimes bleak history of scientific research with human subjects reminds us that we all “have inherited the legacy of researchers who have come before [us]” (Glantz 1996:1384).

Deaf people need to access information visually. Hearing people take for granted the prevalence of auditory information, which is often inaccessible to deaf people living in a predominantly hearing world. This disparity in accessible information is what Richard Pollard, an American psychologist familiar with deaf clients, calls fund of information. Pollen defines fund of information as “the accumulated pool of facts one knows and is a rather separate matter from intelligence” (Pollard 1992; Pollard 2002). Fund of information is an important consideration in a research setting involving deaf and hearing participants where there is inevitable variability in access to
information among participants. Another common feature of deaf populations is variance in literacy and school experience (Hoffmann Dilloway 2011; Mucino Adams 2003; Pollard 2002; Pollard 1992).

I employed a community-based research design to ameliorate the potential for misunderstandings among, and alienation of, deaf youth during the research process. This approach involved participants in the planning stages of research, data collection, and ethnographic representation. Many of the key principles of community-based research overlap with general characteristics of ethnography in that it is also a collaborative, integrative, and iterative process. A community-based approach is an epistemological choice that resonated with my research goals with specific regard to three distinguishing features. First, the inter-relatedness of community and identity was central to my research site and population, as “the concept of community as an aspect of collective and individual identity is central to community-based research” (Israel et al. 1998:178). Second, the idea of collaborative construction of knowledge in a community-based approach, one “that facilitates the reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and power” spoke to my desire for horizontal dialogue between the researcher and participants.

Finally, community-based research is a “positive model,” which draws on the strengths of communities (Israel et al. 1998:179). In this case, I viewed my deaf youth participants’ visually-based understandings as an advantage. I chose visual data collection techniques to incorporate their visual sensibilities into collaborative cultural theorizing. Paulo Freire’s idea that “people have to participate in the research, as investigators and researchers, not as mere objects” (Freire 1982 [1972]:32) influenced my decision to incorporate participatory research methods. By actively engaging my youth participants, I encouraged them to become co-investigators (Freire 1972), a choice that aligns with my community-based approach and provides an opportunity for the incorporation of deaf youth perspectives toward local cultural theories about deafness.

Participatory analysis involved youth as co-investigators and incorporated their perspectives into cultural theorizing. These epistemological decisions regarding methodology and analysis were aimed to access “special insight, insider knowledge, and experience-based understanding” (Hale 2008:23). One of my primary goals was to uncover emic perspectives to address “the question of whether unitary concepts such as deaf culture and deaf identity can be used to gain accurate insight into culturally constructed deaf identities” (De Clerck 2010:440).

Allison James points out that in order to give children a ‘voice’ in our research we must actively involve them in the research process to recognize them “as participating subjects rather than the objects of adult research” (James 2007:262). Researchers have found task-based activities to be “more fun for children than traditional methods” and effective in accessing “children’s distinctive ways of attending
to the world” (Jorgenson and Sullivan 2009:2). The use of participatory methods with children is important because it acknowledges them as “meaning producing beings” (Young and Barrett 2001:141).

Participatory visual methods are suited for children of different ages and aptitudes “without discriminating between those with different abilities, confidence levels and educational attainments” (Young and Barrett 2001:151) and are “believed to enhance the child’s ability to communicate his or her perspectives to the adult researcher” (Jorgenson and Sullivan 2009:4). Photovoice is particularly well-suited for research with deaf children who are reliant upon visual expression and often have limited access to the spoken/written language (i.e. Spanish). The focus of photovoice is visual data; photographs are visual outcomes that are then used as prompts for narratives when participants are asked to “tell the story” of their photos (Brinton Lykes 2001).

Public health researchers, Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, are credited with coining the term photovoice, differentiating it from photo novella or photonovel, techniques also used for language and literacy practices (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice as methodology is inspired by Freire’s idea of critical consciousness (Jurkowski and Paul-Ward 2007) because “Friere noted that one means of enabling people to think critically about their community… was the visual image” (Wang and Burris 1997:370). Photovoice projects generate two types of data in two phases. First, visual data is created when children and youth produce photographs in response to targeted questions or prompts. Second, subsequent interviews about the photographs are used as an elicitation technique to “obtain data on ways that people categorize and organize understanding of cultural domains using stimuli” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:129). These related endeavors prompt participants to “reflect on and record aspects of their own identity and experience” (Booth and Booth 2003:431).

The goal of my photovoice project was to illustrate the importance of LSM in these young people’s lives using their images, thoughts, and language. This creative process allowed me to access elements of the photographers’ identities that would otherwise be difficult to approach. Photovoice is effective for the study of deaf youth identity because it honored children as the experts on their own lived experience, and thus exposed a seldom-represented emic perspective: that of the deaf child. The discussion of photographs in participatory analysis used narrative as a central component for unlocking what Carol Erting and Marlon Kuntze (2008) call the deaf child’s “visual worldview.”

Field Site, Participants & Method

The collaborative project “Proyecto Fotovoz” was part of my ethnographic research exploring the experience of deafness among children and their families in Mexico City, Mexico from August 2012 – July 2013. The data from our photovoice project complimented surveys, interviews, and participant-observation with children,
families, staff and deaf community members. My primary research site was Instituto Pedagógico para Problemas de Lenguaje (IPPLIAP), a not-for-profit school for approximately 100 deaf elementary school children in central Mexico City. IPPLIAP was a unique research site because Mexican Sign Language, or Lengua de Señas Mexicana (LSM), was prioritized in instruction, a rare educational opportunity in Mexico. IPPLIAP was recognized as a leader in pedagogical strategies for deaf children. Each year, IPPLIAP invited experts from all over the world to share strategies and expertise on deaf education to a congregation of educators for the deaf from all over Mexico at the SeñaLees seminar and workshop for a bilingual model of educational for deaf children.

Varying literacy skills were noted among my primary youth research participants, sixth grade students (aged 12-14). Not only did deaf youth in the IPPLIAP community learn and communicate differently than hearing children and adults, many were learning LSM, their first language, relatively late in childhood. Many deaf students at IPPLIAP learned to effectively communicate for the first time considerably later than their hearing peers: at age six or eight years of age and, in some cases, even later. Therefore, special consideration and accommodations were continually made for the child participants in my study, some of which are outlined in this paper.

The methodological process of photovoice involved training the student-participants on photographic equipment and techniques. For this project, I involved Marcela Gómez de los Reyes, a deaf sixth grade teacher at IPPLIAP, as a co-investigator. Together, we created two semester-long, after-school workshops to include the entire sixth grade cohort of students (19 youth participants total). Examples of the ten themes we created to explore aspects of the children’s lives included family, Mexico and the city, a day in my life, school and learning, and sign language.

During weekly photovoice workshops, Marcela and I presented themes we hoped would lend insight into the participants’ experiences and identities. The youth participants responded to these themes with photographed images, and presented their photos to their peers in LSM each week. Participants were also interviewed individually in LSM to follow-up on ideas generated in group discussion during our workshop. The participants’ photos were used as guides and visual cues to augment ethnographic interviews, which in turn generated new research themes through participatory analysis.

In preparation for our community exposition, participants selected photos they felt best represented the project’s ten themes. The exposition was presented at the 9th Annual SeñaLees seminar and workshop, and the sixth grade graduation ceremony at IPPLIAP. The participants’ willingness to exhibit their creative photographic work constructed a venue through which families, teachers, and participants learned about the experience of being young and deaf in Mexico City.

A compelling advantage to using photovoice projects for anthropological research is the opportunity for collaborative, recursive analysis. Photographic images
from photovoice projects undergo a three stage process of participatory analysis involving selection, contextualization, and codification (Wang and Burris 1997:380-81). During our afternoon workshops, student participants presented the photographs they had taken throughout the week, and explained how those photographs addressed the thematic prompts and research questions. Participants were asked to select the photographs they wished to discuss, and by doing so they guided the ensuing narrative processes. Marcela and I then organized individual interviews with each of the students to further discuss themes revealed during the participatory analysis phase.

Participatory Analysis: Lengua de Señas Mexicana (LSM) - Mexican Sign Language

The photos presented here are a sample taken from our June-July 2013 collaborative exhibition “Proyecto Fotovoz”. All photos and titles are the participants’ original work, which they gave me permission to share and use for my research. In preparation for our exposition, Marcela and I interviewed the participants to learn more about these particular photos. During the interview process, participants created the titles for their photos in LSM. The original titles were interpreted into Spanish by Marcela, who is deaf and fluent in Spanish and LSM; I added the English translations for publication. Interviews and participant-observation throughout the school year informed the co-construction of our analyses presented here.

The five examples selected for this article were taken in response to the theme “Lengua de Señas Mexicana/Mexican Sign Language (LSM).” The youth participants were asked to think about and describe LSM through photographs. Like most deaf people worldwide, these youth lived in predominantly hearing environments. In Mexico, Spanish is the dominant spoken language, but these youth varied in their capacity to access spoken and written Spanish. Some used hearing aids or other apparatus, but all considered LSM the language they used to best express themselves. Most of the participants’ family members used LSM very basically, if at all, a detail confirmed by interviews with youth and their families. When Marcela and I asked the students to take photographs responding to questions about the importance of sign language in their lives, the responses didn’t come easily.

Roberto presented the parallel existence of Spanish and LSM in his own life. His photo, “La marca de la fuerza de mi nombre/The forceful mark of my name” (fig. 1), is one example of many participant responses that initially did not appear to correspond with the designated theme “LSM.” Roberto’s parents, uncle, and two siblings were all deaf, so he lived in an environment where LSM was readily used and understood. We questioned Roberto about how this photo of his nickname “Roi” inked boldly across his arm represented LSM for him, but his responses were vague. His reticence toward talking directly about LSM was a theme I encountered repeatedly with my youth participants. Nevertheless, the omnipresence of written Spanish suggested by this photo is an important contribution to understanding the two linguistic worlds the deaf
child must navigate. My deaf participants were confronted with Spanish regularly, regardless of the language used in their homes.

In figures 2 - 4, María Isabel, Emiliano and Bladimir introduce us to a prominent element of deaf culture: sign language *apodos* (nicknames) or “sign names” as they are known in the United States. María Isabel captured her classmates showing their LSM sign names, which represent their Spanish-given names, typically using the first letter of one’s name. In their photos Emiliano and Bladimir showed us the LSM signs for E and B, respectively. Through participant-observation in this community, I learned that these LSM *apodos* are usually assigned by deaf community members, and often play off a person’s physical attributes, personality, and/or tastes. As a person grows and changes, their sign name may be reassigned various times. This collection of photos is a visual explanation of the importance of the deaf Mexican sign name tradition. These participants readily identified the use of *apodos* as a distinguishing feature of deaf culture among their peers.

*Figure 1. La marque de la fuerza de mi nombre*/The forceful mark of my name by Roberto*
Figure 2. Apodos de mis amigos/My friends’ sign names by María Isabel

Figure 3. Seña Risueña/My cheerful sign name by Emiliano
Kevin photographed the monument to Benito Juárez near Mexico City’s historical center. Deaf education is closely associated with Juárez (1806-1872), a cultural and political Mexican icon. Dear to Mexicans for many reasons, Juárez is especially cherished by deaf Mexicans for his role in establishing nationally-funded deaf education as part of his 1856 reforms. The national deaf school (Escuela Nacional para Sordomudos) was Juárez’s legacy to deaf education, and operated in Mexico City from 1866-1962. The Hemiciclo a Juárez that Kevin captured in his photograph was the meeting place for annual Día del Sordo, ‘Day of the Deaf,’ celebrations each November. Kevin explained that his photo, “Juárez Sordo/Deaf Juarez” (fig. 5) shows that Juárez loved deaf people. Kevin’s photo symbolized the dedication of this former president to Mexican deaf education.

The visual data generated by photovoice are the images created by participants. The five photos presented here were analyzed by the researcher and by the participant-photographers, fortifying the authenticity of the analysis. These photographs, accompanied by the participants’ narratives, revealed the emic perspectives of these deaf youth. Three important themes are presented by cross-referencing these photographs with interviews and participant-observation: 1) the coexistence of Spanish and LSM in the lives of these youth 2) the importance of LSM apodos in deaf youth culture and 3) the significance of Benito Juarez to the Mexican deaf community. The participants’ explanations illuminated cultural significance in ways that may have been missed if the images were analyzed without the photographers’
collaboration. Taken together, these explanations illustrate the importance of participatory analysis in photovoice projects. Participatory analysis ensures the involvement of research participants in ethnographic representation, by creating what Goedele De Clerck (2010) calls “an epistemological stance of bidirectionality” (De Clerck 2010).

**Conclusions**

This article outlined the advantages of using photovoice with deaf youth participants. Deaf people rely upon visual expression and need visual input (Erting 1994; Johnson and Erting 1989; Mucino Adams 2003; Ahmad et al. 2002; Skelton and Valentine 2003). The dominant spoken language, in this case Spanish, was not easily accessible to my deaf research participants, which necessitated incorporation of alternatives to “traditional” verbally-based ethnographic methods (i.e. surveys, spoken interviews). Recognizing the necessity for visual communication choices with deaf participants, I used photovoice, which took advantage of deaf youth’s visual learning style and explored their visually-based understandings of the world.

Potential pitfalls of using a photovoice project include anonymity and privacy issues which I addressed by obtaining informed consent from participants, their parents, and the people represented in the participants’ images. Further disadvantages associated with this method were excessive costs and time commitments. Finally, despite my awareness of the issues complicating research in deaf communities, some of which I discussed in this article, difficulties in understanding between researcher and participants were not entirely eliminated. Throughout this research endeavor, I routinely consulted Marcela, IPPLIAP faculty, and participants’ families. These cooperative efforts improved my teaching strategies for photovoice workshops and my rapport with youth participants. Efforts toward ongoing improvement of the project and development of the research themes were also collaborative. Involving Marcela as my co-investigator for this project further allowed me to incorporate emic perspectives into data collection and analysis. Our collaboration proved invaluable to my research and the quality of my experience while in the field.

**Figure 5. Juárez Sordo/Deaf Juárez by Kevin**
Photovoice provided an opportunity for the researcher to access the emic perspectives of deaf youth in a way that aligned with the participants’ visual learning style. The data presented here highlight participatory analysis as an essential component of photovoice as an ethnographic strategy. The advantages of using photovoice with deaf children outweighed the drawbacks. Perhaps most important to me as a collaborative ethnographer, Proyecto Fotovoz honored deaf youth epistemologies by putting the participants “in charge of how they represent themselves and how they depict their situation” (Booth and Booth 2003:431). The use of photovoice aligned with community-based research principals because it allowed the participants’ desires, opinions, and creativity to guide decisions throughout the ethnographic process.

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