Book Review

Mitchell, C., De Lange, N., & Moletsane, R. (2017). Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social change, community and policy. Sage.

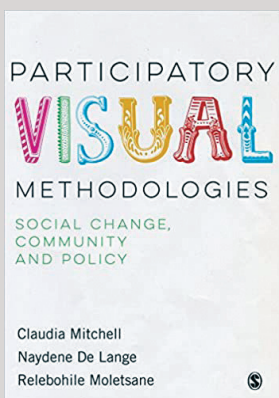**SILVIA GARCIA**

Authors

SILVIA GARCIA
Assistant Director for Research, IUPUI Office of Community Engagement.

References

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Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane (2017) discuss the use of participatory visual research (PVR) to give voice to those involved in research and particularly to create opportunities for social change. The authors intend to shift the conversation on PVR "towards outcomes and the ever-present question 'What difference does it make?'" (p.3). Drawing on the principles of Rose's (2001) critical visual methodology that provide an analytical framework for understanding how images become meaningful to audiences, and from the sociology of literature (Escarpit, 1958) –literature as a socio-cultural fact– the book presents the use of PVR to reach critical audiences and provide entry points to policy dialogues and eventually to social change. Social change is characterized in different ways "new conversations and dialogues, altered perspectives of participants to take action, policy debates, and actual policy development." (p.16).

The authors bring upfront the importance of studying how audiences engage with the visual artifacts, and the importance of political listening, defined as the communicative interaction among political actors that enables democratic decisions about how to react to visual artifacts. Reflexivity is an important element of the authors' framework. Reflexivity is key to ensuring participation, engaging participants, audiences and researchers in questioning the purpose, strategies, and takeaways of visual presentations. Reflexivity can be used as a tool to acknowledge unbalanced power relations between researchers, audiences –policy makers– and participants and may lead to co-construction of meaning. These ideas are used in the book to "theorize the ways in which participatory visual methodologies can be key to leveraging change through community and policy change" (p.193). Both the ways social change is portrayed, and the positioning that researchers, research participants, the community and policy makers take as audiences that reflect on the visual productions, are crucial to understand how PVR can stimulate social transformations.

Chapters 2 to 5 of the book focus on changes in the perspectives and dialogues of participants. By creating awareness among community members and policy makers about what

needs to change and how, visual methodologies are expected to increase community agency and the potential for social change. The authors sustain that to facilitate building strategies that evoke responses towards change, it is crucial to start the research process with an idea of the expected change in mind. Reflexivity is central to audiences' engagement. The authors introduce "speaking back," a method that allows research participants to act as audiences of visual productions, reflect on them and engage in new productions that contest, contradict, or complement the content of previous visual work. The method allows for conversations and discussions among participants, new knowledge creation and participant-driven critique in the context of policy dialogue.

The mechanics of exhibiting the participatory visual product is also key for engaging external audiences and research participants. First, involving participants as co-curators of the exhibition -deciding what to show, to whom, and how- opens the doors for adapting exhibitions to the social context where they are displayed, providing opportunities for learning. Second, this engagement provides a space where participants can interact with audiences (community and policy makers). Third, research participants can actively engage in studying the reactions of the audiences and the factors that affect their response, exploring future courses of action for change based on audiences' response to the participatory visual productions.

The final three chapters (6 to 8) are dedicated to changes in the mechanics of policy making by 1) including the voices of marginalized populations in the policy dialogue, and 2) engaging policy-makers in policy conversations and reflections on what should be done to address the issues raised. Chapter 7 presents participant-led tools founded in the principles of transformative pedagogy for engaging policy-makers. One of the main takeaways of this chapter is that these practices do not necessarily change the power relations that produce the negative conditions in the first place. The book ends with strategies to track change and demonstrate impact. The authors agree that studying the 'afterlife' of a project –after enough

time has passed for policy change to happen– is relevant to understanding social change. An interesting approach is the use of reflexive revisiting. This implies returning to the place where the initial research study was conducted to understand through conversations, interviews and observations the long-term effects of the project and develop explanations of what changed –or not– and why.

The main premise of the book is that "participatory visual research holds potential to bring about change" (p.20). However, the main question "what difference does it make?" remains partially unanswered when the aspiration is policy change. Participatory visual research seems effective to change participants' perspectives and dialogues within their network of personal connections. However, its success in reconstructing policy discussions to include alternative voices and discourses and especially in translating dialogues into social action seems inconsistent. Questions should be raised about: Can community agency for social change be effectively created through PVR alone? How can PVR be used to elicit social action after policy-makers are confronted with the visual representations? More importantly, how can PVR contribute to build the relational context for dialogue and collaboration within the community and with policy makers that is important to energize social change?

In general, the book uses a research perspective that helps understand the interpretive processes, reactions, and meaningful interactions of the audiences (researchers, research participants, community and policy makers) with the visual artifacts during the production and exhibition of the visual pieces. Yet, the discussion of how participatory visual productions create opportunities for interactions and mutual engagements of different groups in co-leading social change is inexistent. In this sense, the gap between research and practice that the book promises to address is still partially unsolved. Possibly, a way to address this gap is as Shawn (2015) has proposed to reframe the use of participatory visual research as a transformational process built not only to facilitate democratic participation, but also to grow the agency, relational capital and energy required to sustain community-driven change.