Visual Research Methodologies for Homelessness: A Synthesis of the Literature

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> **Abstract_** *Visual research methodologies have been utilised to provide depth and context to complex subjects that cannot be captured by words alone. The use of qualitative visual data can also serve as a means to empower participants to share their unique stories. Although researchers have begun to integrate visual research methodologies for a variety of marginalised populations, there is a lack of literature that discusses the use of this methodology specific to homeless populations. This literature review aims to examine the benefits and concerns of using visual research methodologies with individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as attempts to provide some guidelines for their use within this population. Utilising visual research methodologies requires a distinct focus on ethical and legal considerations to ensure data is not compromised by forced changes (e.g. blurring faces) or omitting data. Yet, the use of visual data among homeless populations could provide richer data to explain phenomena or understand lived experiences.*

Introduction

An increasing number of researchers have chosen to utilise visual research methodologies to describe phenomena across a wide range of subjects and contexts. Visual research methodologies can be described as qualitative research methodologies that implement the use of photograph, film, video, and art, to explore and/or understand experiences (Glaw et al., 2017). More explicitly, visual research methods are defined as "systematic ways in which visual materials are gathered or

generated and worked with to understand, explain, or express phenomena – a process that is in constant development" (Asaba et al., 2014, p.155). In the past several decades, the literature has seen a boom in the use of these methodologies with particular emphasis being paid to visual methodologies in the concentrations of social science, healthcare, and psychology (Pain, 2012). See Table 1 below for explanation of several visual methodologies.

Type of Visual Methodology	Uses
Photo-elicitation interviewing	Data collection technique to create a comfortable space for discussion (Epstein et al., 2006).
	Self-expression of perceptions, values, and meaning related to interview questions (Bigante, 2010).
Visual ethnography	Study cultural contexts and ideations (Barrantes-Elizondo, 2019).
	Reflection of memories or experiences difficult to articulate (Harris and Guillemin, 2012).
Participant driven photography/ Photovoice	Health promotion by examining daily routines (Nykiforuk et al., 2011).
	Enhance community engagement, expand community resources, and improve self-efficacy (Israel et al., 2010).
	Develop sense of community/social support (Budig, 2018).
Visual mapping	Defining relationships and connecting ideas (Mammen and Mammen, 2018).
	Analyse data to create themes (Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith, 2010).
Art (calligraphy, clay modelling, doll-making, drawing)	Providing psychological insight into life experiences (Huss et al., 2013).
	Promoting awareness about personal, community, and societal barriers (Huss et al., 2012).
Film making	Promoting advocacy efforts (Baumann et al., 2020).
	Providing insight into novel health practices (Baumann et al., 2020).

In conjunction with the recent uptick in usage of visual research methodologies, several articles have explored the benefits and concerns related to the use of these methodologies. Yet, few of these articles focus explicitly on the use of visual methodologies within marginalised populations or explore the use of such research methods within a population experiencing homelessness, specifically. Thus, this research aims to provide an overview of the current literature available regarding the use of visual research methodologies (Photovoice, mapping, textual analysis of visual media, etc.) and their use within a population experiencing homelessness, including barriers and facilitators to the use of these tools.

Existing Use of Visual Research Methodologies in Researching Homelessness

At present, several publications have utilised various visual research methodologies to explore the experience of homelessness. Johnsen et al. (2008) argue that auto-photography complements other, more traditional, research methodologies in providing a deeper understanding of how individuals experiencing homelessness (IEH) utilise public spaces. Seventeen homeless individuals in England were inter-viewed in-depth about their personal histories, asked to take photos of the places they utilised in their everyday lives or that were important to them, and interviewed after the auto-photography exercise to discuss the photos that were taken (Johnsen et al., 2008). Most of the photos depicted spaces that participants use for everyday activities (e.g. sleeping, eating, earning money), making clear that the needs of IEH were very similar to those of the housed social majority. Furthermore, photos taken by IEH were able to challenge stereotypes typically associated with homelessness, illuminating similarities between IEH and the housed public. Alternatively, partici-pants were able to demonstrate what they view as the key differences between themselves and the housed public, such as the unique conditions in which they sleep. The photos taken by IEH provided insights into aspects of their lives that are otherwise rarely discussed or not well-understood.

In another study, Padgett et al. (2013) utilised photo elicitation interviewing (PEI) with formerly homeless individuals also experiencing serious mental illness. In PEI, participants are asked to take photos and discuss the meaning behind the photos in one-on-one interviews. This methodology differs from Photovoice as PEI is more individualised, allowing participants to feel more comfortable sharing personal or sensitive information. In the study by Padgett et al. (2013), participants first engaged in a verbal-only baseline interview. They were then asked to take photos that depicted both positive and negative aspects of their lives, and interviewed based on those photos. Using PEI, researchers were able to compare the information they obtained through the verbal-only interview with the PEI interview, and found that the PEI interviews led to more elaborate and comprehensive discussions. The photos allowed participants to have control over what they wanted to capture, and to show information that was not mentioned during the verbal-only interviews. Stories and experiences that individuals were reluctant to talk about during the verbal-only interviews were captured in the photos taken during the PEI process, and were able to be drawn on in the post-interviews. In addition, participants saw PEI as a form of therapy, and as a way for them to connect with people and places that were important to them. Taking the photos also gave these participants an activity to occupy their time and allowed them to reflect on their lives.

When discussing visual methodologies, representation of IEH in photographs, movies, and videos is an important consideration. Schmidt (2015) argues that the way in which IEH are portrayed in the media creates a powerful and fixed lens through which IEH are seen by the public. Photographers often do not capture the truth; instead, they capture their own perspectives, which happens to be the perspective of the social majority. As a result, the same photos with the same perspectives are produced over and over again. For example, one genre of photography is social documentary photography, which focuses on depicting homelessness in a wider societal context. Common themes that are present in social documentary photography include IEH sleeping or begging in public, cardboard homes, and living in tents. While these photographs claim to depict the everyday lives of IEH, they instead reinforce and perpetuate negative stereotypes associated with homelessness and are portray the entire IEH population as the 'other', in opposition to the housed social majority.

Schmitt (2015) offers two examples of this phenomenon. The first example, created by a local newspaper in Berlin, attempted to decrease stigma associated with IEH. The project consisted of portrait photographs of IEH presented in public exhibitions in railway stations. Despite the intended goal of the project, there were many underlying problems including:

• the environment of the photoshoot (a makeshift railway station) further perpetuating negative associations with homelessness,

• the associated discourse surrounding the images using words and phrases that clearly separated IEH from the housed social majority (i.e. "the invisible among ourselves")

• the exhibitions themselves in the railway stations were made invisible, and

• the power imbalances between the participants and the photographer with the photographer and the journalists engaging in all the media attention.

Schmidt (2015) presents an alternative example through a study in which IEH were involved in reflexive photography, where IEH were engaged in taking the photos, followed by conversations about the photos. This study found that reflexive photography by the IEH allowed for a perspective that is different from that of the housed social majority. These photos revealed the contrast between the stereotypes of IEH imposed upon them by the public, and the actual intentions of the IEH. Thus, it become apparent that varieties of visual research methodologies exist to explore the experience of homelessness. Yet, all methodologies should be used with caution and full acknowledgement of the facilitators and barriers of each tool.

Facilitators of Visual Research Methodologies: The Case of Photovoice

Visual research methodologies present a unique opportunity for researchers to explore phenomenon with greater depth and nuance leading to increased understanding of subject matter. Some visual research methodologies including the use of ethnographic video and photo place the researcher on the outside of the experience, as an observer of the participants and phenomenon. While other methodologies can be categorised as participatory visual methodologies (e.g. Photovoice), involving the subjects and researcher in the study. Regardless, the purpose of visual research methodologies can be considered to either tell a story, elicit a story, or as a story itself (van den Scott, 2018). The use of photos or other visual methods adds richness to understanding and often clarify muddy concepts.

One currently trending visual methodology is Photovoice, which involves participant-driven photography, followed by discussions and interviews regarding the photos. Photovoice was initially developed in the 1990s with the aim to provide a qualitative methodology to conduct research in marginalised populations. Validated in a variety of populations, including women living in rural China (Wang et al., 1996), sex workers (Desyllas, 2013), youth experiencing homelessness (Bender et al., 2017), and individuals with mental illness (Creighton et al., 2018), Photovoice is a visual methodology with the goal to empower communities to share their stories with others to create change (Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice has been touted as a research methodology that can create accessibility for all individuals within the research process both as interested participants and as consumers of research, due to the photographic nature of the data (Golden, 2020). Thus, Photovoice has been utilised to provide data on a variety of research questions across disciplines within the homeless population (Bukowski and Buetow, 2011; Cheezum et al., 2019; Moya et al., 2017; Pruitt et al., 2018).

There are many reasons as to why visual research methodologies are a good fit in conducting research with vulnerable populations, and specifically with IEH. One such reason is that visual research methodologies reduce the risk of re-traumatising individuals who have past experiences with trauma due to the increased autonomy provided through some visual research methods. For example, one study that used auto-driven photo elicitation methods to study experiences of homeless women found that giving the women the ability to make choices about the content of the photos allowed them to participate in research in ways where they would not have to relive traumatic experiences they had previously faced in their lives (Phipps et al., 2020). Another reason why visual research methodologies are effective in research with vulnerable populations is that they leave participants with feelings of enhanced self-confidence, self-efficacy, peer status, quality of life, and persistence

to achieve their goals (Wang et al., 2000; Bender et al., 2017). Furthermore, visual research methods engage consumers in research, taking an often lofty and cerebral concept and making it easily accessible in nature. The ability for IEH to share their photos or videos with the public allows them to raise awareness of homelessness, educate the public on homelessness, and advocate for themselves (Wang et al., 2000; Bender et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2019). In turn, the public is given the opportunity to learn about the lives of these individuals, consider issues surrounding homelessness from the perspectives of IEH, develop deeper empathy for the adverse experiences of the homeless population, and self-reflect on their own privilege (Wang et al., 2000; Bender et al., 2017).

Research regarding the use of participatory visual methodologies has demonstrated the ability to reduce stigma in marginalised populations. For example, Bender et al. (2017) conducted a study in which Photovoice was used as an intervention method with homeless youth. The participants documented their lives, openly discussed with researchers and completed journal entries regarding their experiences, and shared the photos with the community in a public exhibit. Through this process, the homeless youth reported feeling like they were a part of a larger community, and realising that they were not alone, and felt the exercise helped them address much of the shame they felt from being homeless. Another study that utilised Photovoice to explore the experiences of homeless youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, Queer, etc. (LGBTQ+) found that the methodology provided a unique and creative way for the participants to push back against the stigma they faced based on their identities as homeless and LGBTQ+ (Forge et al., 2018).

For visual research methodologies focused on engaging research participants, the use of narratives can provide a unique insight into the individual's daily life, specifi-cally the daily activities, environments, people, and/or customs they find most meaningful. For example, one study that used Photovoice with IEH living in Taipei found that the photos taken by the participants focused on things that mattered to them and that brought joy and satisfaction to their lives, such as food and their companions (Cheng, 2021). The same study found that the open-ended nature of photos allowed for further explorations of the topics during the discussion phase of Photovoice, through which more information about the participants' lives were able to be drawn out. Visual research methodologies that engage participants in the research process can be utilised by service providers as form of assessment or intervention within their clinical practice. Disciplines such as case management, social work, occupational therapy, and psychology may choose to utilise such participatory visual research methodologies as a means to encourage participant self-discovery and promote cognitive and psychological processing through critical reflection (Brown and Egan, 2019). As an assessment measure, participatory visual methodologies provide an opportunity for a researcher to gain qualitative data on

an entire population or community, while simultaneously exploring the specific experiences of each participant. Further, the use of visuals as a means to express the topic allows for better understanding of the lived experiences of participants, that individuals may find difficult to express through clinical assessment or verbalisation (Brown and Egan, 2019). Participants who create visual data elicit knowledge of their daily lives into qualitative data that may have remained unveiled through quantitative research methods such as surveys (Guillemin, 2004). Creating visual data through participatory visual methodologies also benefits participants with low literacy skills, as they are able to express their thoughts as opposed to answering questions on traditional data collection methodologies (Jurkowski, 2008).

It is clear that there are many benefits associated with conducting research with IEH using visual research methodologies. Yet, visual research methodologies, including Photovoice, carry limitations and should be used carefully in practice.

Concerns with Visual Research Methodologies

Researchers have raised ethical concerns regarding visual research methodologies, including concerns over privacy of participants and those in participant photos/videos, capturing of illegal activities and concerns with appropriate interpretation of visuals. When collecting any data, researchers are held to ethical and legal standards enforced by Institutional Review Boards, grant agencies, or other private/public institutions. However, the use of visual data collection methods (e.g. photographs and videos) that are not intending to be destroyed, but rather are themselves the data, results in a myriad of limitations. First, when using photographic methods, like Photovoice, in which participants are asked to collect visual data, there is a concern of privacy for those who may appear in the pictures or video. While participants may have signed a print release for their likeness to appear, subjects in their photos may not have had this opportunity. Thus, researchers desiring to use strong visual data, which depicts non-consenting individuals, are forced to pixelate or blur faces to preserve anonymity, resulting in a loss of some of the meaning attached to the visual research data (Wiles et al., 2008). This creates a barrier by putting focus on the altered portion of the photo and decreasing the empowerment that the photo possesses. Oftentimes, facial expressions are used to depict the meaning and overall attitude of a photo, which can create a negative connotation for the visualisation when it is blurred (Woodgate et al., 2017).

Another limitation of visual data comes in the form of the subject of the visuals. Due to ethical and legal concerns, limitations are often placed on what is acceptable to be depicted in photos. Due to the nature of visual research methodologies as a means to tell stories that may be difficult to explain or verbalise, many researchers

aim to use these methodologies with marginalised populations or to answer research questions that are not easily observed through other qualitative means. Often, these studies result in images that may depict 'illegal' activities, such as substance use, sex work, or violence (Woodgate et al., 2017). The presentation of 'illegal' activities within the data must be handled carefully by the researcher, ensuring the proper consent was obtained, use of the visuals was appropriately explained to the subject prior to engagement in the study, and that all measures are taken to protect the anonymity of those in the visuals. In addition, the use of visual data has the potential to create, rather than reduce, stigma of certain populations (Copes, 2020). In a series of studies examining methamphetamine use in rural America, Copes et al. (2019) note that the use of photographs told a story that words alone could not, and publishing photographs in his final manuscript allowed the reader to take the subject matter from abstract to concrete. Yet, the research team reported getting push back from other academics who questioned issues of participant's ability to consent, as well as, the research team's motives and sense of empathy toward the population. In response to these comments, Copes et al. (2019) writes, "By properly contextualizing the photographs included in our research, we hope to minimize the ability to misrepresent these images and to depict the 'truth' as revealed by our data and analysis" (p.14).

One option for ensuring proper contextualisation of visual data can include feedback from subjects on the researcher's conclusions. Yet, too often materials and data are under-analysed because the interpretation of the data is determined by the researcher(s) or author(s) without subject or participant input (Mannay, 2010). Even in the event that researchers should include subjects in the final data analysis, some exceptions may still result in incomplete pictures of the data. Participants may be unable to be located to provide their opinion on the analysis or may struggle to understand what is being asked. For example, participants who have impaired cognitive function may have difficulty understanding the study or producing appropriate visual data (Jurkowski, 2008). And in studies involving IEH, researchers were often not able to recover cameras they had passed out to participants due to the transient nature of this population (Packard, 2008). Furthermore, participants may produce visual data that has no symbolic value to the audience as the meaning is dependent based on the photographers' interpretations (Nykiforuk, 2011). Thus, the researcher may be left to interpret visual data on their own, relying on their own positionality and critical reflexivity of the subject matter.

As with all research methods, qualitative and quantitative, the positionality and critical reflexivity of the researcher is an essential component of the study affecting the data in a variety of means. At present, it is common for researchers to define their positionality related to the subject within their accompanying manuscript. Yet, a simple statement of positionality may not provide enough information for readers

and can serve as a disservice to the research. Rather, the act of critical reflexivity, defined as "the process of exploring the ways in which researchers and their subjectivities affect what is and can be designed, gathered, interpreted, analyzed and reported in an investigation" (Gemignani, 2016, p.185) may be of greater importance than simply the positionality of the researcher. Thus, understanding the researcher and subjects influence over the results must move beyond a statement to an active experience of navigating the complex social and cultural experiences of all involved and the resulting effect on the data.

Moreover, the success of using visual research methodologies with IEH may be dependent on the structure of a study. Packard (2008) conducted a photo-elicitation study with IEH, where the researcher handed out disposable cameras to participants and asked them whether they knew how to use the cameras. While most participants were quick to express that they knew how to use the camera, when the cameras were recovered, the researcher found that most photos were unusable due to fingers blocking the lens, blurry photos, and photos that were too dark to see any content. On the other hand, Wang et al. (2000) conducted a Photovoice study with men and women living in homeless shelters where participants first attended workshops on proper camera usage before going out and taking pictures. This study turned out vastly different from the previous study, and both the participants and the researchers found great value from having been a part of this study. As a result, the knowledge of the participants must be taken into account before using visual research methodologies in order to obtain usable data.

Finally, for visual research methodologies that focus on empowerment of populations and communities, the promise of systemic change with little results can be viewed as an ethical limitation (Golden, 2020). The use of empowering visual methodologies, such as Photovoice, can be inherently problematic. When researchers promote their position as one who can enable empowerment for participants, there is an assumption that the population is powerless without the researcher intervention. Instead, researchers must recognise the current ways and ways their study may lead to empowerment without an assumption of such ability. In addition, researchers must be transparent and honest about their ability to create large-scale change from a single or series of studies.

Recommendations for the Use of Visual Research Methodologies in Researching Homelessness

In this research note, we have presented both the benefits and concerns of the use of visual research methodologies. Visual research methodologies have the potential to depict phenomenon with greater depth, ground knowledge in concrete under-standing, and can provide a voice to marginalised populations. Yet, ethical and legal limitations for visual methodologies exists which could serve to cause harm to the populations being studied. Issues of legal representation in photographs, ethical data analysis, and transparency surrounding change lead to the use of caution when employing these methodologies.

Specifically with a population of IEH, the use of visual research methodologies may be a powerful tool in understanding the unique culture, society, and experiences of this group. Based on the benefits and limitations of such methodologies, we propose the following suggestions for completing research using visual methodolo-gies in a population of IEH:

- When determining which visual research methodology to use, it is essential to acknowledge the cognitive capacity and literacy level of the participants. Capacity of the participants has the potential to influence the outcome of research; particularly when asking participants to capture images which covey meaning or assign meaning to images.

- Another consideration for use of all methodologies within the homeless popula-tion is the transient nature of the population, including visual methodologies that may result in multiple contact points with participants over time. Researchers must consider options to locate and meet participants for multi-stage research. Available resources and transportation should be explicitly considered for participants, including having researchers meet participants where they are rather than requiring participants to travel to a specific site.

- Researchers must clearly outline the ethics of using visual research method-ology with participants by delineating appropriate visuals and items that may render images unusable. It may be helpful to provide some examples of the desired visual data to prevent poor quality photos, blurred photos, and photos that violate ethical considerations. Further, practice with using visual capturing tools (e.g. cameras, phones, recorders, etc.) may be beneficial for clients expe-riencing the use of these items as novel.

- Visual research methodologies can create an intimate experience for participants and researchers by allowing researchers to glimpse private moments of individual's lives. Researchers should strive to building rapport with participants at the beginning of and throughout the process to make participants feel comfortable exposing the private details of their lives.

- Another way to add to the participant comfort level is to ensure to discuss the purposes and intended use of visuals created during the research with participants. Researchers should provide transparency about how the project can both result in their images being used for advocacy efforts (e.g. social media accounts, art exhibits, etc.) and being presented in academic texts. Participants may also feel more reassured by having some amount of approval over the final images, any generated captions, and their intended use.

- When using methodologies that focus on empowerment and social change for marginalised populations, it is essential to allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words and generate captions for what is depicted in the visual data. This participatory experience can allow the researcher to capture fully the meaning of the data collected. It may also be necessary to ensure a plan is in place to capture the meaning of images that contain ethical concerns without implicating participants or violating institutional review policies.

Visual research methodologies in marginalised populations can serve to be both a means and an ends to empowerment. The act of engaging in research that utilises visuals can feel inherently empowering for IEH. Many IEH report a distinct desire to give back to their community and support others with similar experiences (Barker and Maguire, 2017). Thus, the act of engaging in research that is designed to create change for the future can feel like a meaningful way for IEH to contribute to the future of their experience. In addition, literature demonstrates that IEH experience high levels of boredom and engagement in activities that individuals find meaningful can increase overall mental health and wellbeing (Marshall et al., 2019). Therefore, while the use of visual methodologies is often only considered in terms of benefits to the researcher or the population, engagement in participatory research methodologies may also benefit the individuals engaged in the research while they actively participate.

Visual research methodologies can be utilised in marginalised populations to better understand the daily life experiences. While research has attempted to understand the daily life of IEH, engagement in participatory visual methodology could elaborate the activities they are participating in. Tyminski et al. (2020) concluded that those who do not experience homelessness engage in similar activities as IEH such as finding or using drugs, dealing with legal issues, and seeking resources. Although the study found all participants engaging in the same activities, the ways in which

they engaged in the activities differed. By using participatory visual methodologies, research can expand on how IEH engage in certain activities. Literature on homeless populations suggest that prolonged experiences of homelessness and substance use can impact cognition, which may adversely affect how IEH communicate or explain aspects of their lives (Schutt et al., 2007). Visual research methodologies, such as Photovoice, could add context to how IEH report during interview and survey questions.

Conclusion

Visual research methodologies can be an important tool for exploring the unique experience of homelessness, particularly for those who do not have the cognitive capacity or literacy skills. For marginalised populations, it can be difficult to understand and recognise the barriers they experience in their daily lives, especially when it may not be easily portrayed with words. Using visual research methodologies provides depth to qualitative data collected in traditional methodologies (e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups) and can enrich the discussions. Furthermore, visual research methodologies give participants autonomy to be creative in expressing their lived experiences in addition to an otherwise traditional verbal expression. Visual methodologies are particularly advantageous to participants who have a difficult time with cognitive function and literacy because they can conceptualise their experiences within their own means to do so.

Visual research methodology can create a wealth of qualitative data to benefit results; however, the ethical and legal considerations must be addressed to ensure retainable data can be created without disruption. It is essential to file the proper consent forms and follow ethical guidelines in visual research to prevent unusable content after collection has concluded. The communication and understanding between researchers and participants must be clear, which might be difficult when working with varying levels of cognitive function. Participants may need to develop on-going check-ins to determine if the data being collected follows the proper guidelines. Additionally, researchers must be able to acknowledge the limitations of participants to facilitate meaningful and valid data. The benefits of visual research methodologies allows participants to share life experiences that may be too difficult to do so using traditional means and the results can change how we study and understand daily living.

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