Realist Evaluation

Principles and Practice

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Chapter 13

Theorising through the Lens

Introducing a Realist Photovoice Technique

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13 Theorising through the lens

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Making a case for a realist photovoice technique

Photovoice is a participatory research method using participant photographic dialogue to encourage reflections on relevant social issues while empowering the participants to take control of the situation. The photovoice technique is claimed to improve the participation of vulnerable groups and empower them, thus emancipating them (Budig et al., 2018). Its ability to facilitate an authentic and meaningful collaboration to co-create/co-produce knowledge in healthcare makes it attractive to researchers (Halvorsrud et al., 2019). Like the teacher-learner realist interview approach, participatory research emphasises an 'educational aspect of social investigation' and translates participants' lived experience and everyday knowledge, supporting its potential compatibility with realist principles (Westhorp et al., 2016).

We recently applied the photovoice technique in critical realist-informed research to explore its potential to uncover generative mechanisms and emancipatory potential (Mukumbang & van Wyk, 2020). It enhanced the connection between the empirical data and theoretical analysis as the information shared by the participants emanated from their volition per the research objective(s) (Mukumbang & van Wyk, 2020). To this end, the photovoice technique favours retroductive theorising, a retrospective approach to unearthing the generative (social) mechanisms and structures responsible for the outcomes observed when an intervention, programme, or policy is implemented in a particular setting (Mukumbang, 2023; Mukumbang et al., 2023).

In this chapter, we introduce a realist photovoice technique which provides practical applications and guiding principles for using photovoice in realist evaluations and possibly other realist-informed inquiries. We unpack the photovoice technique as a potential tool in the toolbox of realist researchers and explore its potential contribution to enhancing programme theory co-elicitation between the researchers and stakeholders. In the following sections, we will underpin the photovoice methods in realist principles and illustrate how these methods can constitute a valuable data collection tool to enhance retroductive theorising and emancipate the stakeholder groups involved. Furthermore, we will demonstrate how the realist photovoice

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technique addresses power inequities during researcher-participant engagements by giving participants ownership over the research process. Finally, we consider when and why to use the realist photovoice technique and when it might not be appropriate.

The photovoice technique

Photovoice integrates images and words to encourage the exploration of people's experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes. Wang and Burris (1997) first proposed photovoice as a process through which participants own and share their narratives by capturing photographs that depict their lived experiences (Figure 13.1). As co-researchers, participants are asked to reflect on their experiences or feelings relating to the research question and select photos to instigate this discussion, with this selection process meaning they take on a significant role in driving data analysis. This technique has been applied at both the individual and group levels. In these discussions, researchers may consider adapting existing frameworks or developing their guiding questions (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The photovoice technique values local participants' experience and knowledge and gives power to participants as co-researchers to control

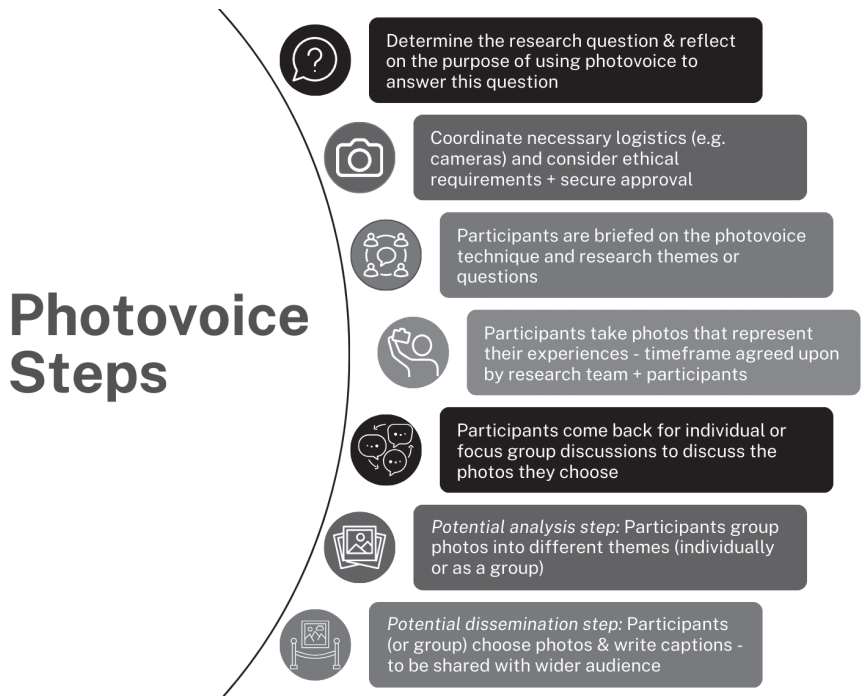


Figure 13.1 General steps followed in implementing photovoice.

and voice their narratives and can encourage collaborative learning across community members, researchers, and decision-makers (Hergenrather et al., 2009). Creative participatory activities help build trust and disrupt the researcher-participant relationship's 'traditional power structures' (Mannay, 2010). Visual activities such as photovoice can allow individuals to participate more freely, without concern for literacy or language barriers influencing the interview dynamic (International HIV/AIDS Alliance, 2006). Wang and Burris (1997) described how photovoice empowers participants and communities to define and represent their realities; as a result, they may put forward ideas that challenge the expectations and narratives of the researcher, contributing to the mitigation of power imbalances in research. Photovoice also allows communities to engage and discuss issues collectively when used in a group or at the community level (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Previous photovoice participants have appreciated the platform, suggesting it provides a safe space to reflect and communicate creatively (Sutton-Brown, 2014). By actively addressing the power dynamics in hierarchical and heterogeneous research settings, incorporating photovoice approaches has the potential not only to improve participation in realist research but to facilitate the process of generating insightful knowledge with meaningful implications for practice (Jagosh et al., 2015; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

However, there are also potential challenges to consider in conducting photovoice, such as the ethical implications of privacy and taking and sharing photographs, especially those depicting people (Woodgate et al., 2017; Teti & van Wyk, 2020). Additionally, researchers must consider the logistical and practical components of implementing photovoice, from the availability of cameras and film to communicating or explaining the 'ask' of what participants should do (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Finally, while photovoice is lauded for addressing power imbalances in data collection, little is known about how photovoice can be used to engage participants in co-designing and defining the direction of the research. Researchers must, therefore, remain cognisant and intentional in ensuring participant-driven storytelling and acknowledge the other ways power imbalances may still be present throughout the research process (Wang and Burris, 1997). While applying the photovoice technique, how we define 'participation' and achieve capacity building through participants' engagement is explored less.

The photovoice technique, power dynamics, and emancipation in realist evaluation

Participatory research encompasses research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by an issue being studied for action or change (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The photovoice technique is frequently adopted in collaborative evaluation

and empowerment evaluation approaches. Although realist evaluation has not traditionally been considered part of collaborative evaluation and empowerment evaluation approaches, participatory research methods such as photovoice align with the realist paradigm and have been adopted within realist evaluation designs (Harris, 2020; Renmans et al., 2022). Participatory research methods value genuine and meaningful participation in the research process, and their methods are predominantly applied when some of the stakeholder groups involve vulnerable and at-risk groups.

Realist evaluation is a theory-driven approach that guides the implementation of complex interventions through iterative theory development, testing, and refinement. Participatory evaluation involving the active participation of relevant local stakeholder groups or representatives is gaining traction in realist-informed evaluation (Griffiths et al., 2022). Adopting the photovoice technique in realist evaluations enhances stakeholder participation in theory formulation. Bhaskar (2008), in his critique of the conventional evaluation methods, revealed that the science of evaluation should start by recognising that the fate of social [interventions and] policies lie in the choices of choice makers. This assertion is supported by Pawson and Tilley's (1997) conceptualisation of mechanisms as resources plus actors' reasoning, which also puts the actors at the centre of realist evaluation.

Participatory research methods, such as photovoice, encourage active involvement and co-production of knowledge to empower stakeholders (Budig et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these methods are conspicuously less considered in realist-informed inquiries. While Pawson and Tilley (1997) paid less attention to using participatory research methods in realist evaluation to consider power dynamics, Bhaskar (2009) was concerned with power dynamics issues and considered emancipation an essential aspect of research conducted using realist-informed methods. He suggested that emancipation speaks to the world becoming meaningful to the stakeholder in question, where their thoughts, understanding, and values are no longer seen as subjective classifications of the mind but constituting their reality (Bhaskar, 2009). Although this meta-reality is individualist, it can lead to collective action oriented toward emancipation to achieve social justice (Dean et al., 2006), an explicit goal of the photovoice methodology.

Regarding emancipation, therefore, critical realist approaches strive to contribute to changing the world for the better through the creation of structures that are wanted, needed, or generally emancipatory (Wilson & Greenhill, 2004). This is achieved by unveiling how things are necessary to demonstrate the place of human acts in the 'reproduction of social structures and relations that stand in the way of emancipation' (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2003, p 23). Through retroductive theorising, uncovering underlying mechanisms and structures that explain an observation or a phenomenon (Jagosh, 2020), such as inequity in healthcare service delivery, realist-informed research approaches enable reflections on alternative structures where genuine and equitable healthcare service delivery can be considered.

Layered ontology

Bhaskar's (2008) book *A Realist Theory of Science* lays out the foundation of the realist 'deep' ontology. He proposed that the world is stratified into three domains: the domain of the '*empirical,*' which entails our observations of events that occur in the domain of the '*actual,*' which are caused by underlying mechanisms and structures that are part of the domain of the '*real.*' Realists' position is that the object of science should be unearthing these mechanisms and structures, which are usually hidden.

Photos and other visual tools have been used to uncover social mechanisms that can explain a social phenomenon. By taking pictures and sharing their significance with others, the researcher can unveil the individual's thought process and emotional state to understand their decision-making vis-à-vis the observed behaviour. These emotions and thought processes are found in the 'real', which have caused the events (situated at the *actual*) the individual is recounting or describing using the images and the images and discussions (situated in the *empirical*).

Intransitive and transitive parts

Causal entities such as gravitational forces are usually unseen and are considered intransitive entities —human actions cannot change them. They represent laws and properties of the world independent of our knowledge of (and efforts to understand) them. Through research activities, we can formulate theories and develop models to postulate their existence. These models and theories, like programme theories developed through realist evaluation, are considered transitive entities—amenable to alteration by human action. An individual's worldview is related to their social role. Individuals can play multiple roles at any time, and the types of roles can vary across time and place (Dean et al., 2006). While playing different roles, individuals may be involved in various relationships, each exerting peculiar causal tendencies (Dean et al., 2006). The meaning-making opportunities that the photovoice technique offers using images allow individuals to represent their different roles and the meanings they attribute to them to capture their social situations. These different roles can be observed when individuals enter designated social positions to engage (or not) in social practices (de Souza, 2013). For example, Lennon-Dearing and Price (2018) used photovoice to explore the realities of women living with HIV, which allowed them to systematically unpack their roles as mothers, patients, substance abusers, criminals, and lovers, thus identifying the relevant generative mechanisms for the outcome or observation of interest.

The photovoice technique allows participants who live and experience a phenomenon to take centre stage rather than being foregrounded through the researchers' viewpoints (Glaw et al., 2017). Because the study participants are central to setting the study's agenda, most photovoice practitioners consider them as co-investigators (Woodgate et al., 2017). The philosophical implication is acknowledging that participants' experiences produce knowledge of

themselves. Within this context, various stages of meaning-making are associated with the photovoice technique; the participants' narratives and reflections during the image discussion sessions are analysed by the researchers to understand the meaning attached to them. Therefore, different layers of meaning can be unearthed as the photovoice components evoke deep emotions, memories, and ideas through multiple interpretive and subjective moments. These interpretive and subjective representations constitute the transitive, as they can change over time as the emotions and perspectives of the co-investigators change.

Emergence and open systems

Emergence occurs when a whole (an outcome) possesses one or more emergent properties (Elder-Vass, 2010). Unobservable entities are structured, and these structures are nested within other structures, for example, family dynamics nested within cultural or religious practices. These entities are usually unobservable, and their operations depend on situational conditions created by complex interactions with other things (Brönnimann, 2022). The occurrence of novel qualities from the interactions of these existing entities is described as emergence. The emerging outcomes are not the sum of the parts of the interacting entities. Thus, they cannot be reduced to the entities that combined to form them. For instance, perceived HIV stigma can be attributed to a combination of cultural norms and an individual's interpretation of the cultural norms, but cultural norms alone cannot cause perceived stigma. The photovoice technique can capture these emergent behaviours by recording multiple moments and aspects of the phenomenon under consideration.

The notions of open and closed systems further capture the concept of emergence. Realists contend that the world is an 'open system' with a constellation of structures, mechanisms, and other entities responsible for the observed demi-regularities. Bhaskar (2016) explained that human capacity and agency are omnipresent and unceasing in their capacity to alter their environment. Within the open system, structures and other entities can potentially influence demi-regularities or outcomes. Interventions are implemented in systems that involve multiple factors associated with the intervention, the context and the people involved. These factors can influence each other in creating creative and unexpected but influential effects on results (Allana & Clark, 2018). The role of the photovoice technique is to work with agents considered part of the open system to unpack those contextual and structural issues that influence their attitudes and actions.

Aligning the photovoice technique to realist principles

The principles underpinning realist evaluation constitute an amalgam of scientific and critical realism philosophies of science (Mukumbang et al., 2023). Following the notion that the adopted methodology and epistemological

foundations should inform the data collection and analysis processes (Nichol et al., 2023), we situate photovoice, a participatory research method developed from an interpretivist point of view, in realist evaluation. The premise of our argument here follows that interpretivism and critical realism recognise the importance of ideas, experiences, narratives, and discourses in understanding social phenomena. However, realist-informed research employs these forms of expression to explore causal explanations (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). The understanding is, therefore, that while the data collection technique developed from an interpretivist perspective might be useful, it must be adapted to align with methodological realist principles to harness its full potential in realist evaluation. Therefore, we extend this argument to introduce a realist photovoice technique. To achieve this, we discuss how realist principles should guide adopting photovoice techniques in realist evaluation.

Situating photovoice within realist evaluation study design

Realist evaluation is generally conducted in three phases: theory gleaning, theory testing (refining), and theory consolidation (Manzano, 2016; Mukumbang et al., 2020). The theory-gleaning phase, as the name suggests, is exploratory. Usually, it entails developing an initial programme theory or conceptual framework about the underlying mechanisms of the intervention, policy, or programme (Sobh & Perry, 2006). Different sources of information can inform the development of the initial programme theory. The existing information through systematised reviews, document analysis, and interviews with relevant stakeholders can inform the initial theory construction (Mukumbang et al., 2018). The realist photovoice technique can also be employed to elicit relevant information from the targeted population to inspire the development of the initial programme theory.

The theory testing phase also takes an eclectic methodological approach. This phase usually follows an explanatory theory-building approach designed as case study research (single or multiple cases). It involves formal data collection and analysis methods to validate, falsify, and modify the initial programme theory. The photovoice technique can be a suitable data collection tool used in isolation or combined with other data collection methods. We had previously successfully used photovoice as a single approach to unpack the dynamics around antiretroviral medication adherence among adolescents living with HIV (Mukumbang & van Wyk, 2020).

The theory consolidation phase is the second-level refining and fine-tuning of the initial programme theory. It represents the final stage of retroductive theorising and may entail the application of retrodiction when conducting cross-case analyses and comparing in-case theories from selected cases to obtain a more refined theory. Photovoice exhibits could be harnessed as a potential avenue for theory consolidation and higher-level abstractions, especially when implemented on a participant basis – bringing together different types of participants or case studies, if applicable.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) identified context, mechanisms, and outcomes as the three central constructs to explaining how and why programmes work or not, with the notion that an outcome (O) is generated by a mechanism (M) being triggered in a particular context (C). Realist programme theories are primarily formulated using the Context-Mechanism-Outcome configuration (CMOC). The goal of data analysis in realist photovoice is to identify CMOCs within the conversations instigated by the photos in tandem with the transcripts. Gilmore et al. (2019) emphasise identifying linked CMOCs within the transcript excerpts; this informed our development and inclusion of the CMOCs and the presented photos in the case study described in this chapter. However, it is noteworthy that Jackson and Kolla (2012) suggest identifying linked dyads (mechanism-outcome, context-mechanism, context-outcome) and triads (context-mechanism-outcome) during analysis, which may be a preferred approach in some cases.

A realist photovoice technique: Experiences from Zambia

The realist photovoice technique was recently used in a realist evaluation focused on the community engagement conducted by Safe Motherhood Action Group (SMAG) volunteers in the Eastern Province of Zambia (Dada et al., 2024). This multi-method study conducted focus group discussions with community members and in-depth interviews with SMAGs, local leaders, health facility staff, and pregnant women. In this case study, data was collected through observations, interviews and focus groups with different stakeholders, and the realist photovoice technique was used to test programme theories (Table 13.1) initially developed in a realist review (Dada et al., 2023). The realist photovoice technique was conducted with the pregnant women (PW) participant population to test these programme theories and uncover their feelings, perspectives, and experiences with the community engagement intervention, messages, and decisions to seek antenatal care.

Before deciding on, planning, and conducting data collection through the realist photovoice technique, the considerations (expressed as reflective questions) in Table 13.2 were examined.

Two prompts, described in reflective question 5, were chosen to uncover the generative mechanisms to explain SMAGs' influence on antenatal care attendance in the first trimester of pregnancy. In addition to determining what participants should capture in the photos, the researchers also had to coordinate the logistics of the photography equipment. Previous photovoice experiences have used disposable or non-disposable film cameras, digital cameras, and smartphones (Hergenrather et al., 2009). Based on experiential knowledge of the community and available resources, inexpensive digital cameras were chosen over disposable film cameras and provided to participants. While many in the communities could access cell phones, smartphones with built-in cameras were uncommon. The digital cameras were simple to use and durable, with rechargeable lithium batteries, eliminating the need for

Table 13.1 Theories tested through realist evaluation using realist photovoice (Dada et al., 2023)

Programme theories (PTs) tested in realist evaluation in Zambia	
PT 1: Community is actively involved (co-creation)	When communities are actively involved throughout the identification, design, and implementation of messaging delivered by the SMAGs, the communication is more relevant, acceptable, and trusted. Community members and SMAGs play an active role in co-creating the communication messaging by informing what information should be communicated, identifying challenges or misunderstandings, and raising overall awareness of the project and early antenatal care through tailored messaging. This increases ownership and enables longer-term sustainability.
PT 2: Messaging and programme are acceptable	When the project acknowledges and considers local practices/norms and power structures in communication messaging and processes, and these approaches and programme goals are tailored appropriately to the community, then the project and its messages will likely be acceptable to and shared further by the community.
PT 3: Communication sources are trusted	When messaging aligned with community members' values and experiences is delivered through familiar or agreed-upon communication avenues/structures by respected and influential SMAGs, the communication for the community engagement programme is trusted.
PT 4: Community has a reciprocal relationship with the programme	When the actors involved in maternal and newborn health programmes and delivery (including local leaders, SMAGs, and health providers) develop a positive relationship with community members and directly act on feedback from the community to inform the programme and messaging, community members feel heard and valued as equals.
PT 5: Community sees value or benefit from the programme	When a community experiences or perceives benefit from the project through the shared messaging, knowledge gained, or services provided, they are inclined to support/participate and disseminate messages further. This enables the longer-term sustainability or continued functioning of the maternal and newborn health programme.

extra batteries, and included a micro-USB charging cable and lanyard. The researchers included a 32 GB micro-SD memory card in each camera (as well as a micro-SD to SD adapter). These were fully charged before they were distributed to participants, allowing for eight hours of use, and participants were encouraged to turn off the camera when it was not in use to preserve the battery. When participants returned for the follow-up conversations, the researchers inserted the micro-SD card into a USB memory card reader on a laptop. The participant and researchers could see the photos on the laptop screen, and the participant pointed to which photos they wanted to share.

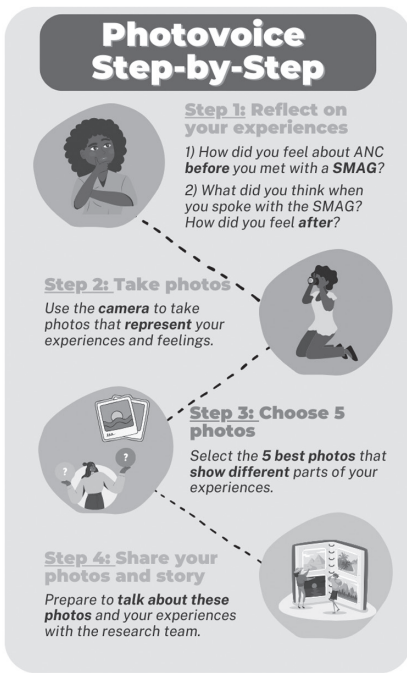
As was appropriate in the community, participants in the realist evaluation received a nominal financial amount for their transportation costs. Because photovoice participants were met twice, they received half the amount in

Table 13.2 Reflective questions in planning for and conducting a realist photovoice technique

Reflective question	*Zambia case study example*
1 Why do I want to use Photovoice?	The researcher (as an outsider) wanted to address potential power imbalances with participants to encourage open discussion based on previous experience observing this group's interview hesitation.
2 What role would photovoice play in my realist evaluation?	The realist photovoice technique aimed to test programme theories developed in a realist review; however, photovoice prompts could also cause new theories to emerge.
3 What perspective am I trying to capture?	The researchers want to understand the influence of community engagement on pregnant women's decision-making about care-seeking: a What factors influence or prompt pregnant women to seek antenatal care early? b How do community engagement activities affect this? c What is pregnant women's perception of/experience with this community engagement?
4 Who can provide this perspective?	Pregnant women: this is often a less enfranchised group, and the researcher is trying to uncover the generative causation in their decision-making processes to seek care.
5 What photovoice 'prompts' can provide this perspective?	Participants take photos representing feelings at two different time points: a How they felt about care-seeking 'before' interacting with a SMAG. b How they felt about care-seeking or the SMAG 'after' they met.
6 How will participants take photos, and what supporting materials do they need?	a Decide whether to use digital cameras, film cameras or smartphones. b We developed verbal and pictorial instructions in English and local dialects. c Included a photo release form specifying the use and dissemination of photos in ethics applications.

the first instruction meeting, and the other half at the end of the follow-up conversation. Photovoice participants kept the cameras at the end of their participation in the research. To address ethical implications for the photovoice activities, consent and photo release forms were signed by participants to ensure dissemination of the photos in research and policy publications.

Realist photovoice prompts, instructions on how to use the cameras, and general information about the project for the consent process were provided in English and Nyanja, the local language, to participants when the cameras were given (Figures 13.2 and 13.3). When the researchers explained the photovoice activity in the initial meeting, they provided an example of a photograph that could be taken, and tested for participants' comprehension of the activity by having an initial discussion as a group about what they would consider



Figures 13.2 and 13.3 Equipment and support materials given to participants.

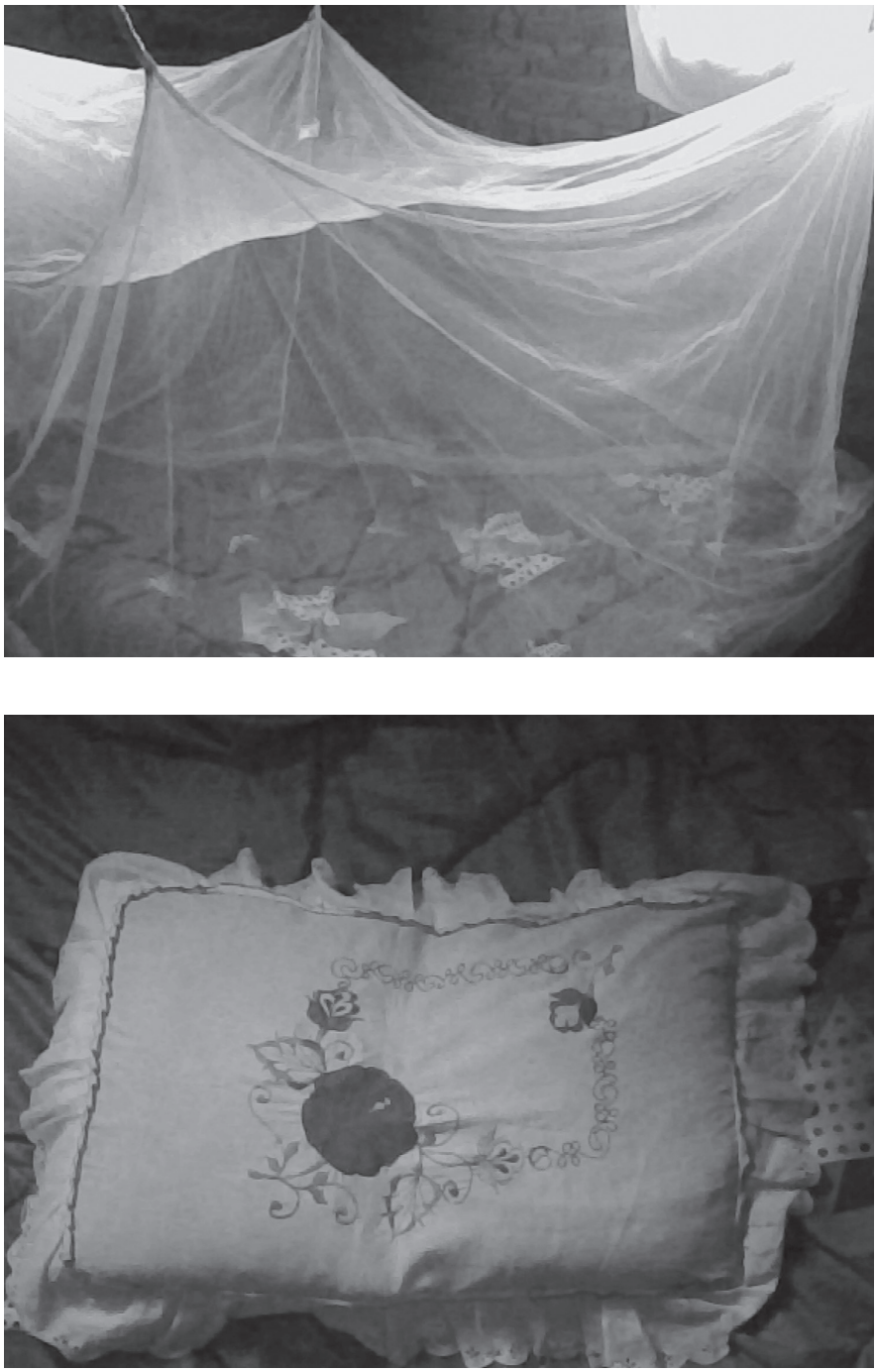
photographing to answer the prompts. If comfortable, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and feelings and discuss the activity with their family and friends before taking photos. The researchers and participants then agreed on the time and place for the follow-up conversation. According to the project timeline, these occurred four to six days after initial introductions.

The researchers conducted a pilot interview with a participant who was introduced to photovoice and given approximately five days to take photos before the scheduled follow-up conversation. After this first conversation transcript was reviewed, adjustments were made to the process before finalising recruitment. For example, researchers incorporated informal discussions with participants on what photographs they might take, to test their comprehension and understanding of the two prompts (how they feel before and after interacting with an SMAG). Furthermore, the researchers informed potential participants that they could exit the study without consequences, such as being denied health care services. Consequently, two potential participants declined to participate, and researchers were able to recruit other participants.

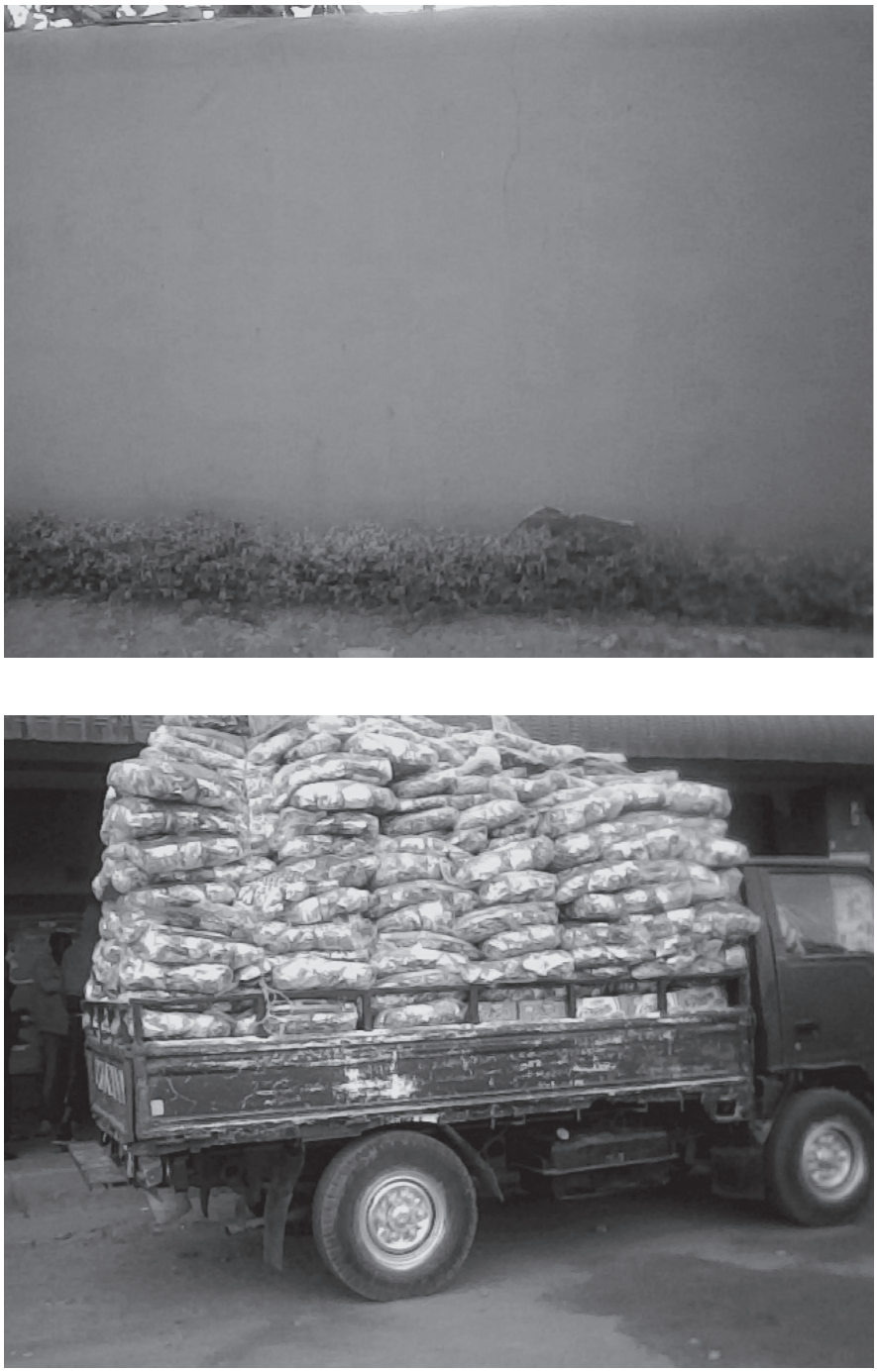
The participants generally seemed to understand and apply the photovoice prompts. While participants brought several distinct images that could potentially be interpreted differently, they often described the pictures in similar ways. For example, Figures 13.4 and 13.5 illustrate how participants generally 'felt good' after meeting the SMAGs, mainly because they acquired knowledge from them. Although the researchers used follow-up questions to clarify, unpacking what this meant specifically or how the photos were distinguished was often challenging. However, the purpose of photovoice is for participants to decide what to share and to what extent; therefore, researchers accepted vague or repetitive responses. Indeed, the participants' use of different photos to represent the same feeling or perspective on the SMAGs could indicate that this was an important or dominant feeling.

While the prompts asked participants to capture their feelings before and after meeting the SMAG, they often presented photos reflecting both sides of the same concept (e.g. a bench without a cushion and then a bench with a cushion to represent gaining something new). This type of presentation was predominantly related to a lack of knowledge and gaining knowledge, which was also the central aspect shared by participants (Figures 13.6 and 13.7). Although knowledge was a consistently described benefit of the SMAGs, it was still challenging to uncover the underlying mechanisms that may have been at play. The researchers asked probing questions about why gaining new information was important, how it made the participants feel, or how it influenced their future decisions to unravel the generative mechanisms behind acquiring knowledge (the 'resource'). This finding remained valuable because the emphasis on information sharing and knowledge acquisition was not previously reflected in the programme theories that informed the data collection tools.

The participants also shared photos, providing insight into the interactions and demeanours of the SMAGs when they met with them. These examples, demonstrated in Figures 13.8 and 13.9, were often less literal than some of



Figures 13.4 and 13.5 Photovoice examples about 'feeling good'.



Figures 13.6 and 13.7 Photovoice examples relating to before/after learning information.

Figures 13.8 and 13.9 Photovoice examples of interactions with SMAGs.

the other photos shared and could be considered more reflective of the programme theories being tested and refined in this study. For example, one participant shared a photo of a car, expressing that it would carry any passengers no matter who they were. This idea represents how the SMAGs served any of their community members without passing judgement. Another participant described the jovial nature of their interactions with the SMAGs and how they learned from them through their use of humour to make the information more relatable to their experiences and easier to understand. The participant captured this in a photo of chickens playing to represent how the SMAGs 'play' with them as pregnant women.

The prompts used during the realist photovoice data collection in Zambia were intentionally broad to encourage participant voices to lead the conversations. Researchers were familiar enough with the programme theories being tested in the realist evaluation that they could follow up or probe these concepts when participants shared a photo or experience related to one of them. In Figure 13.9, the photovoice conversations provided insight into a programme theory that had been challenging to discuss with other interview participants. Throughout data collection, when asking about how the SMAGs communicated with the community and pregnant women (relating to PT 2 on acceptable messaging), participants often described the information (e.g. danger signs in pregnancy) rather than how the information was shared. In this realist photovoice conversation with a pregnant woman, she organically brought up this dynamic of 'how the chickens are playing' as a representation of her interaction with the SMAGs. This representation allowed the researchers to probe this programme theory about what type and how messaging was conveyed. Our illustration of how the realist photovoice technique contributes to developing or revising programme theories is typified in Table 13.3, which shows how CMOCs, informed by the realist photovoice data and other case study data, were analysed, and synthesised to inform a new programme theory.

Challenges and reflections when conducting realist photovoice

Photovoice enables participants to communicate their experiences to provide explanatory value while maintaining control over which experiences they disclose, and how they are represented by choosing the direction of the discussion through which photos they share (Amenyah et al., 2021). As with many experiences in data collection and research, the realist photovoice technique was not conducted without challenges. After adjusting the photovoice introduction process following the lessons learned from the pilot, we received some thought-provoking photographs from the participants. They were metaphoric — using animals and cars to represent their experiences with SMAGs in ways the researchers did not always expect. Some participants struggled to articulate why they took some of their photos when sharing their stories, and the onus was handed to the researchers interpret their symbolic meaning.

Table 13.3 Refining and developing programme theories with realist photovoice data

Programme Theory: Sharing valuable and relevant information to the community contributes to a positive relationship between the SMAGs and the community, especially pregnant women, as this new knowledge provides value and benefit to the community
CMOC1: Knowledge is caring. In a community with limited institutional knowledge around maternal health issues (Context), when the SMAGs share maternal health information/knowledge (Mechanism – Resource), pregnant women feel that the SMAGs care about them (Mechanism – Reasoning), which contributes to a positive relationship between the SMAGs and the pregnant women (Outcome). Data sources: Realist photovoice – PW1, PW2, PW4, PW5; Focus Group Discussion Thought process: This CMOC relates to SMAGs sharing information and knowledge with the community/pregnant women, thus influencing their relationship positively because they feel like they care or are trying to help.
CMOC2: Knowledge makes me feel good. In a community where pregnant women are not aware of maternal health practices (Context), SMAGs providing useful information about maternal health care (Mechanism – Resource) are positively received (Outcome) because women perceive value in learning about how to take care of their health (Mechanism – Reasoning). Data sources: Realist photovoice – PW3, PW4, PW5 Thought process: This idea of 'feeling good' is associated with the information provided—partially because they learned how to address any ailments or illnesses they were experiencing during pregnancy.
Notes on how these CMOCs contribute to theory refinement: These CMOCs, in addition to CMOCs from other data sources, contributed to refining theory. The realist photovoice data emphasised the role/importance of information and knowledge in the dynamic relationship between SMAGs and the community, particularly pregnant women. This emphasis was not previously reflected in any programme theories in the enquiry, so this new programme theory has been formulated.

Participants, especially programme end users, seldom explicitly present generative mechanisms during realist interviews. This challenge remained true for the realist photovoice in the Zambia case study. For example, participants shared photos that represented *'feeling good'* after meeting the SMAGs. Although the photos would differ and likely hold distinct meanings to the participants, their verbal reflections and explanations would return to '*I felt good because they gave me information.'* When asked why they felt good or how that made them feel good, the responses relayed ideas like '*I didn't have the information before, but after meeting the SMAGs, I did, so I felt good.'* Researchers responded to this by asking questions in new and different ways, including giving examples of their own experiences or describing what they had observed in the community. Additionally, it is essential to remember that not every question and answer has to be about a specific programme theory, and the information gleaned from an interview can still provide valuable

insights even when it does not go as planned (Gilmore et al., 2019; Manzano, 2022). Although it was difficult to determine the different implications of feeling good, this emphasis on perceiving information acquisition as a benefit was still a valuable learning in this case study.

When participants were less verbally expressive about their photos, researchers incorporated more 'traditional' realist interview questions relating to the programme theories to ensure participants could still reflect on the programme theory ideas. For example, the researchers presented the programme theory on trusted communication sources (PT 3) to one participant during a photovoice conversation: '*Similar to what you have told us about your 'granny SMAG,' there is this idea that when the community respects a SMAG, people will trust them and their messages. What do you think of that?'* This approach was incorporated at the end of the discussion or throughout the conversation as participants shared a photo or idea that was tangential to the programme theory areas. The following excerpt with a different participant demonstrates this:

Participant: *The patients need to trust the SMAGs, and the SMAGs need to trust the patients.*

Interviewer: *That's very interesting because there is this idea that when a SMAG is known in the community, people will trust them and the information they share. So, what do you think of that?*

Participant: *I don't agree with the idea because even someone from a different area can come to your community and educate you on something you don't know that even that person doesn't know.*

Another challenge that is not unique to the realist photovoice experience is ensuring the willingness and interest of participants to participate in the project. First, the researchers addressed this by gauging how enthusiastic participants were to participate during the introductory meetings. Like other qualitative interview experiences, it can be challenging to encourage participants to be expressive. Photovoice was incorporated in this case study to meaningfully engage with the participants and empower them to express their stories comfortably. In practice, some participants were still reluctant and potentially influenced by the researcher-participant dynamic. For example, a participant conversant in English was jovial and talkative when the researchers interacted with her around the facility or in the community. She participated enthusiastically and took notes throughout the introductory meeting and on her photos to share during the interview. Once the audio recorder was turned on, she became demure and responded to questions only in Nyanja. To address this challenge, the researchers continued to spend time in the facility and the community to develop positive relationships with potential study participants. The initial realist photovoice conversations were also conducted in Nyanja with simultaneous English translation. To improve the rapport and conversational dynamic in these interactions, the researchers transitioned to having the local research assistant lead the interviews directly

in Nyanja without any simultaneous translation into English to make participants feel comfortable.

Using translators to enable communication between the researchers and the co-investigators is a common practice in both photovoice and realist studies. Challenges with using translators in realist evaluation studies have been noted, especially regarding its implications for investigating and developing CMOCs (Gilmore, 2019). As illustrated by the Zambia case study, language played a significant role in the dynamic between researcher and co-investigators. The impact of language was particularly apparent when participants were asked to tell a story around the photo to elucidate its meaning. In many cases, we observed that co-investigators were less expressive, potentially due to differences in language structure. We noticed that Nyanja could be a complex language, using long phrases when written; this might have influenced word choice and the flow of conversation, especially when a participant was shy. In cases where researchers use realist photovoice in a group setting, it is also essential to consider the group dynamic and ensure the participation of potentially lesser-heard voices. Group settings offer what Manzano (2022) describes as 'group intelligence' (or 'group reasoning'), which can be realised when each participant is allowed to reflect on photos shared by other group members (Mukumbang & van Wyk, 2020).

Another important consideration when planning the realist photovoice technique is the logistics, such as the type of camera provided to the co-investigators. In a previous realist-informed photovoice study, we provided Samsung cell phones because the price of disposable cameras and printing film almost matched that of the phones, which produced better photo quality (Mukumbang & van Wyk, 2020). While there were concerns that the co-investigators could be robbed of their cell phones during the study period, the investigators thought these devices could be helpful for the individuals beyond the study scope. Another benefit of providing the phones to the co-investigators described by the study coordinator, a medical doctor at the clinic, was the opportunity to create treatment support WhatsApp forums. We could also opt for smartphones because South Africa had a steady electricity supply to ascertain that the phones would be charged. In comparison, basic digital cameras were chosen in the Zambian case study because of their simplicity and cost, whereas smartphones would have been less appropriate in this setting. In other resource-limited countries, the availability of electricity and/or film should be considered for the type of device used in a photovoice study.

Relatedly, researchers must consider the perception of giving participants a camera; this introduces a dynamic of gift-giving and requires participants' engagement in a research project through activity outside the direct researcher-participant interaction. In the case study, a participant expressed that her husband was sceptical about where she received the camera and initial transportation compensation and became upset. When the participant shared this experience with the researchers, the approach outlined in the ethics application for cases where psychosocial support was followed: highlighting potential

support mechanisms available, asking the participant what she wanted from us, and ensuring she led the next steps. In this situation, the participant suggested the researchers meet with the family to introduce the project and case study directly to them and hand over the camera and transportation compensation in front of the group, which was received well. Providing compensation to participants, whether monetary or other benefits such as the cameras, has ethical implications that should be considered to ensure the process is appropriate and not perceived as transactional (Ng et al., 2023). As with other research activities involving compensations, the value and implication of the gift should be reflected, including when and for which participants it is appropriate and safe. Based on these learnings and experiences, Figure 13.10 provides guidelines and recommendations for planning and implementing the realist photovoice technique.

Photovoice activities in research provide an excellent opportunity for dissemination through the co-development and co-curation of content with the participants (Liebenberg, 2018). Previous photovoice projects have used the photos of participants in photo essays, booklets, and exhibitions to contribute to research dissemination and knowledge translation (Lennon-Dearing & Price, 2018). For instance, Lennon-Dearing and Hirschi (2019) found that sharing photographs and stories with the public via community exhibits empowered women living with HIV, where they combined a sense of personal

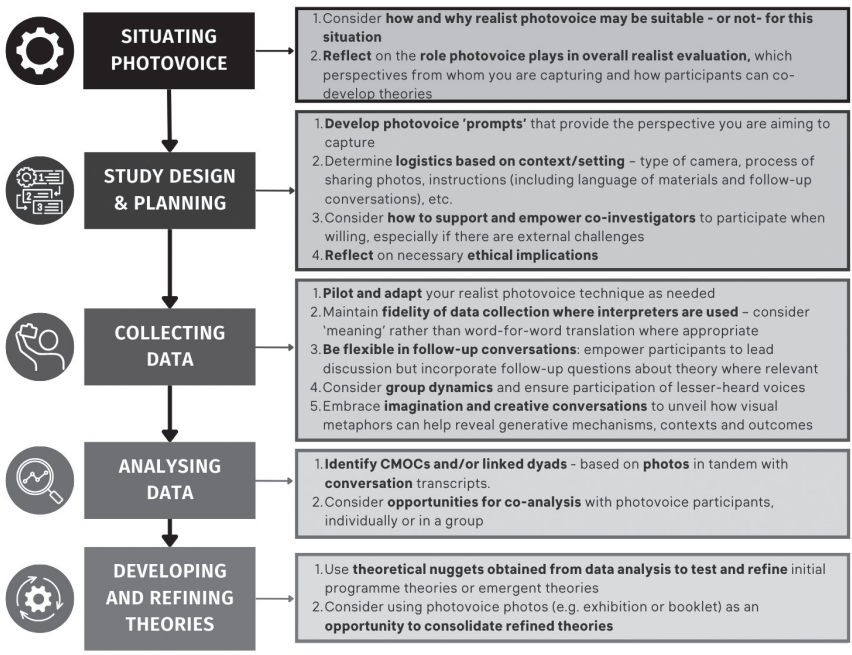


Figure 13.10 Guidelines and recommendations for a realist photovoice technique.

control with the ability to influence their environment and affect the behaviour of others actively. This activity can enhance the theory consolidation process. Realist photovoice discussions could play an essential role in translating the findings to policymakers and programme implementers in creative and digestible ways.

Future research directions and the use of the realist photovoice technique may entail considering its impact on data collection versus conducting only a 'traditional' realist interview. However, it is essential to note the challenges in conducting a thorough assessment of the contribution of photovoice to realist data collection because the experience of implementing photovoice depends on the individual participants, their interpretations of the prompts, their willingness to participate in the project, and their articulation of their narratives.

Conclusions

We argue that while there is room for adopting existing qualitative data collection methods which are well-developed within other paradigms, such as photovoice, to lines of realist inquiry, we should also delink these methods from their ontological backgrounds and adapt them to conform with realist ontological and epistemological principles. Thus, our realist photovoice allows for the creative imagination of information sharing during a realist inquiry's theory gleaning and testing phases. This chapter introduces a realist photovoice technique by providing lessons learned from experience, practical applications, and guiding principles for using photovoice in realist evaluation and possibly other realist-informed inquiries.

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