A view from the ground: using participatory photography with hunter-gatherer children (Peru)

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Résumé :

Une vue du sol : utilisation de la photographie participative avec des enfants chasseurs-cueilleurs (Pérou). Cet article explore l'utilisation de la photographie participative dans la recherche ethnographique avec des enfants chasseurs-cueilleurs. En m'appuyant sur mon travail de terrain en Amazonie péruvienne, j'examine comment elle peut conduire les chercheurs à dépasser la notion de « voix de l'enfant » et se pencher sur les domaines non verbaux de la connaissance dans une perspective centrée sur l'enfant. Tout en reconnaissant les inconvénients et les limites des méthodes visuelles centrées sur l'enfant, je me concentrerai principalement sur les avantages de l'utilisation de méthodologies qui peuvent fortement stimuler l'enthousiasme et la participation des enfants dans le processus de recherche, permettant aux chercheurs de s'éloigner d'une approche centrée sur les adultes.

Mots-clés : recherche centrée sur l'enfant, enfance des chasseurs-cueilleurs, photographie participative, méthodes visuelles, Amazonie

Abstract :

This article explores the use of participatory photography in ethnographic research with hunter-gatherer children. Drawing on my fieldwork in Peruvian Amazonia, I examine on how participatory photography can help researchers of childhood to move beyond the notion of *child voice* and explore non-verbal realms of knowledge from a child-centred perspective. While acknowledging the drawbacks and limits of child-centred visual methods, I will focus primarily on the advantages of using methodologies that can highly stimulate children's enthusiasm and participation in the research process, allowing the researchers to move away from an adult-centric research approach.

Keywords : child-centred research, hunter-gatherer childhoods, participatory photography, visual methods, Amazonia

Abstracto :

Una mirada desde el suelo: utilizando la fotografía participativa con niños cazadores-recolectores (Perú). Este artículo explora el uso de la fotografía participativa como método de investigación etnográfica con niños cazadores-recolectores. Basándome en mi trabajo de campo en la Amazonía Peruana, quiero examinar cómo la fotografía participativa puede ayudar a los investigadores de la niñez a ir más allá de la noción de *child voice* y explorar ámbitos de conocimiento no verbales desde una perspectiva centrada en los niños. El artículo examina las oportunidades que ofrece la fotografía participativa, permitiendo a los investigadores alejarse de un enfoque de investigación centrado en los adultos.

Palabras clave : investigación centrada en la niñez, infancias de cazadores-recolectores, fotografía participativa, métodos visuales, Amazonía

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Introduction: a view from the ground

The image below (*cf*. Figure 1) shows David, an 11-year-old Indigenous Matses boy, holding a digital camera and pointing it upwards to photograph a plantain tree in his family's cultivated field. The photograph was taken by another Matses boy, Diego, 12 years old, using another of the digital cameras that I gave out to children during my fieldwork. I was not with them when they took these photographs – the boys were walking around the field and spending time by themselves, without any adults, as hunter-gatherer children often do.

Figure 1 – David photographing a plantain tree

Source: Camilla Morelli, 2010

David and Diego grew up in a village of about 200 people in the Amazon rainforest, in Peru. At the time these photographs were taken, in 2010, they had spent most of their time in their village in the forest and never travelled outside of rural Amazonia. David's viewpoint from the ground up, pointing the camera towards the forest trees above him, creates a contrast with the opening

passage of one of the most influential monographs in the anthropology of Amazonia, *Marriage among the Trio*, by Peter Rivière:

During my months among the Trio, my world had shrunk to the size of their world. As the aeroplane lifted above the trees, the visual realization of the immensity of the Universe was thrust violently back into my awareness. It was like the reawakening of a long forgotten taste. (...) Could an Indian's eyes and mind have adjusted themselves to comprehend such a vast and undifferentiated view as the jungle affords from the air? (1969: vii).

As he looks down from the airplane, Rivière compares his airborne view from above to that of the people on the ground below. Having emerged from his fieldwork in the forest, he questions whether the eyes of someone who has spent their whole lives down there – like David and Diego – could ever adjust to, and indeed comprehend, the change of perspective and awareness afforded by the elevated view on the aeroplane. It is implied, in a sense, that viewing from above generates new ways of knowing and understanding the world: seeing and knowing converge, and unequal technological and economic relations transform into uneven vantage positions.

Rivière's opening account of looking down from the airplane is followed by a classic structuralist analysis of Trio marriage rules, which is focussed more on the structure of social organisation seen from an outside perspective than on people's lived experiences and own viewpoints. Anthropologists have indeed pointed out that a "bird-eye-view" approach is distinctive of structuralism (Fabian 1983: 52-69), which has been long critiqued for overlooking how people themselves view the world and instead generating abstract representations "detached from the real experiences of people in a lifeworld" (Willerslev 2007: 94).

The work of Rivière was written more than half a century ago, and his acknowledged scholarly contributions extend beyond *Marriage among the Trio* (Rival & Whitehead 2001); however, structuralism had significant weight and long-lasting influence in the anthropology of Amazonia and beyond. Only much later anthropologists began to challenge the structuralist bird-eye-view in favour of ethnographically-driven research approaches that would do justice to Indigenous people's own ways of seeing and thinking about the world. And at present, these efforts are being taken further by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars who advocate for a shift away from traditional anthropological approaches and towards research collaboration and co-creation (Bird-Naytowhow 2017; Cisek & Uricchio 2019).

Despite these later efforts, however, most of the works conducted with hunter-gatherer and Indigenous people across the world continue to focus primarily on the adults and their own perspectives, while still addressing children from an adult-centric view from above. Although there are plenty of works centred on children's own lives, knowledge and viewpoints in anthropology and the social sciences (Montgomery 2009: 43), the vast majority of these are based on research conducted in industrialised and urban contexts (Corsaro 2011: 308). Very few researchers working with rural and hunter-gatherer peoples have addressed children as primary research respondents, and even fewer have done so by using participatory and visual methods that can engage children actively in the research process (Hewlett & Lamb 2005; Bird-David 2005).

This article explores the use of participatory photography with hunter-gatherer children, evaluating its potentials to promote ethical and child-centred forms of research and representation. All the photographs I present here were taken by Indigenous Matses children aged 6 to 14 in

Amazonian Peru, with whom I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork for the past ten years using collaborative and participatory methodologies (such as drawing, filming and co-produced animation). Much like Rivière suggests that his view from above affords a unique vantage point onto the forest below, I propose that the *view from the ground* in the photographs taken by children opens up a unique perspective onto the world as seen from their embodied standpoints – which in this case is aided by the electric circuits of a camera rather than the technology of flight.

In the following sections, I discuss the use of participatory photography and suggest how this method can help researchers to: (*i*) address and expand the notion of *child voice*; (*ii*) explore non-verbal realms of knowledge from a child-centred perspective; and (*iii*) grant children freedom to document their daily lives, which can have relevance for the future. I do not claim that participatory photography is the only efficient method to produce valuable work with children, and instead, I acknowledge the limits and drawbacks of using participatory techniques in child-centred research (Mitchell 2006). But given that such methods are still limited in ethnographic research with hunter-gatherer and rural children – if not entirely absent in studies of Amazonia – I will highlight how participatory photography can offer an alternative to standard methods of research and representation, and stimulate children's enthusiasm and participation in the research process.

Beyond words: photographs as *child voice*

A firm assumption that has become commonplace in child-centred research is the necessity of "giving voice to children's voices" (James 2007: 261), intended as a commitment to take seriously what children themselves have to say rather than assessing their knowledge from an external, adult-centric viewpoint. This standpoint emerged in response to the problem that children's voices had for a long time been "muted" in childhood studies (Hardman 1973), and since at least the 1990s, researchers working with children started making a consistent effort to address them as primary research respondents and include their voices in their work. This meant first of all asking children questions instead of talking to adults about them, and then reporting children's dialogues and own words in the text (e.g. James 1998, Corsaro 2003, Goodwin 2006).

While the importance to hear children's voices remains paramount in studies of childhood, a number of researchers have recently begun to question what we should mean by listening to children's voices and to suggest that the very concept of *child voice* needs to be defined. This is because children express themselves in a multitude of different ways that are not limited to words and speech, whereby "listening to children's voices" can take many different forms (Carnevale 2020: 1) and requires "not only hearing – but attending to – children's feelings, beliefs, thoughts, wishes, preferences and attitudes" (Murray 2019: 2).

Given that children have different linguistic capacities and express themselves in substantially different ways compared to adults, standard word-based methods such as structured interviews or thematic dialogues are not always adequate when working with them. And for this reason, researchers of childhood have applied a variety of non-verbal and non-textual research techniques that are better suited to elicit children's modes of expression – such as drawing, collaborative filming, participatory photography and many others (Thomson 2008).

A method that has gained much popularity in child-centred research is *photovoice* (Denov *et al.* 2012; Goodman *et al.* 2018), a combination of visual and verbal storytelling where children document their daily lives by taking photographs and then discuss the images with the researcher.

The use of photovoice is based precisely on the idea that images produced by children can be interpreted as themselves a kind of voice, and is often applied with youth who feel marginalised and unseen by the rest of society as a strategy to help them voice their concerns and gain visibility (Guerrero *et al.* 2010).

In my own work, photography also became a form of voice or expression through which the children and I started communicating even before we could speak the same language, and it was crucial for me to begin my fieldwork when I first arrived in a Matses village. Matses people have a relatively recent history of engaging with outsiders. The whole population lived in small communities scattered in deep forest until the 1960s, having only sporadic and violent contact with other people. From the 1980s, they started to establish permanent villages on the banks of wide rivers and closer to non-Indigenous territory, and to rely on growing exchanges with the national society. But despite these recent changes, their villages remain fairly remote from urban and non-Indigenous settlements (it takes 12 hours on a canoe to reach the closest town from the village where I work, and an additional two-hour flight from there to reach the closest urban settlement), and their encounters with outsiders are infrequent[1].

When I first arrived in the village where I work, I did not speak Matses (the language spoken by Matses people, classified by scholars under the Panoan linguistic family) and only a few adults in the village where I work speak Spanish. As such, I initially struggled with major language barriers. My interactions with the children began from the very first week of fieldwork, however, through the use of visual media. The children would ask me every day to draw with the stationery material I had brought with me and to walk around and take photographs with my camera. The use of photography can also be interpreted as a kind of *child voice*, insofar as it allowed the children to communicate with me and to express their passion for digital technologies beyond (or before) words.

None of the children had taken photographs before, and when I started distributing digital cameras to them, they were absolutely thrilled and eager to do so. There is no electricity in the village, and no telephone or Internet connection either, but children and young people have a true passion for digital technologies, and they often say that they would like to be able to use the Internet and watch television. Every day, groups of children would come look for me early in the morning and ask me to hand out the cameras to them, and they would huddle round each camera discussing how to use it and giving instructions to each other. They then brought the cameras back to me at sunset, and we watched the images together on my laptop, powered by a solar panel that I had brought to the village.

The children learned to use the cameras quickly and were soon able to take photographs while carrying out all sorts of daily activities, as shown in the images below (*cf.* Figure 2 below). From the top left, the photographs portray a boy carrying a heavy load of plantain from the field back to his house, walking on a path through the forest; a boy canoeing on the river; a girl fetching water; and a boy trekking on a forest path.

Figure 2 – Children moving in their daily surroundings

Source: Camilla Morelli, 2010

The use of participatory photography and the material presence of the cameras was therefore a crucial tool that set up an ethical and constructive relationship between the children and myself from the very start of fieldwork, despite our initial language barriers. And even when I learned Matses and could communicate fluently, I kept using photography and other visual media in my research. These methods stimulated children's enthusiasm and participation in different ways than standard research techniques, like semi-structured interviews or thematic dialogues. When complemented with words – for example, by bringing it together with storytelling and image-elicitation – participatory photography can offer a way to move beyond the notion of child voice as limited to words and speech, and to engage children in the research process in a way that is much more suited to their own volition and preferences.

Since the start of my fieldwork in 2010, I have been returning to the village every year to visit

and conduct further work, and the children are the first ones to welcome me and ask me to play, draw and take photographs. As such, the first great advantage of using participatory photography, as well as other visual methods, is that it allows researchers to stimulate children's participation beyond word-based techniques, while establishing a relationship of trust between the children, their parents and the ethnographers that is an uppermost ethical priority when working with children and young participants.

Capturing "what goes without saying"

A recognised advantage of using visual methods with children is that they can grant them greater freedom in terms of how and what they choose to represent, so that children themselves can choose the focus and directions of the research process (Kullman 2012). Some of the aspects that children bring up through visual representations (such as drawings or photographs) are not often if ever communicated verbally, reinforcing the idea of photography as itself a kind of child voice. Visual anthropologists have much argued that the use of visual methods in ethnographic research offers a way to venture beyond the limits of ordinary language and to explore imaginative, unspoken forms of embodied knowledge that are not articulated through words (Irving 2011: 22; Pink 2009; Cox *et al*. 2016).

For example, in my previous work, I have used participatory photography to build an analysis into intergenerational changes and shifting relationships with the environment in Matses society (Morelli 2017). Specifically, I have analysed how the presence of the river in children's photographs reveal something of their passion for the riverine environment and their daily engagement with it. This passion is not shared by their elders, who prefer spending time in the forest rather than the river, having profound consequences for the future of Matses society and dwelling environments. Used as such, participatory photography can offer a starting point to analyse and document the trajectories of social change.

The photographs below (*cf*. Figure 3 below) reveal an aspect of everyday life that is equally crucial for Matses children, but also rarely spoken out – i.e. their daily engagement with trees. All the images are taken from below, offering view-from-the-ground onto the children as they play and harvest wild fruits. From the top left, the images portray a seven-year-old girl climbing up a tree for fun; an eight-year-old boy holding on tight on top of an *ungurabi* tree to collect its fruits, which are boiled and eaten or pressed to make juice; three girls playing up high on tree branches; and a ten-year-old boy standing on top of a tree branch, carrying a knife in his trousers.

Figure 3 – Children harvesting fruits

Source: Camilla Morelli, 2010

It is relevant that trees are an almost constant presence in the photographs I collected during fieldwork, and they are not just shown as landscape in the background but as an active entity that children engage with both for amusement and subsistence (I have analysed the relationships between play and work in depth elsewhere – see Morelli 2017). The children would not openly discuss their passion for trees and put it into words, and I never heard children say “I love trees” or anything of this kind, and yet much of their life is spent playing on, underneath or around them. Like anthropologists interested in implicit and embodied knowledge have stressed, we cannot reduce “what people know to what they say” (Harris 2007: 13), whereas much of our daily knowledge “goes without saying” (Bloch 2012: 143) and is not articulated in speech. As Bloch put it, the “types of knowledge which are… less easily accessible to the consciousness of the actor… are, in many ways, the most important since they are what enables people to operate in the world” (*ibid*: 144).

As a bodily activity that is not limited to vision but encompasses a full physical engagement with the world, photography can help access these realms of implicit and embodied knowledge from children's own perspectives. The camera is aligned with the child's body in action and these photographs open up situated perspectives onto the world as the children access it in a given circumstance and from specific angles that reflect the height and age of the child – as well as the kinds of movements that are afforded by the children's bodies – revealing a multiplicity of viewpoints that are not easy for adults to access, if not entirely impossible. Matses children and adults are tremendously skilled and agile, and physical dynamism are key to performing vital activities in Matses environments, as common in hunter-gatherer societies (Lancy 2008). Matses people spend much of their time performing physically challenging active that require stamin and resistance: canoeing on the river, trekking for hours through the forest, planting and harvesting their fields, collecting and carrying home water from the river, and many more.

Dynamism is also central to Matses children's favourite activities for playing and leisure, which encompass climbing up trees, swimming in the river and against the current, racing on canoes, and running around. While I spent much time with them playing, I was never fully able to engage in the same activities they performed, for example when they were climbing up to the top of a tree or hanging out on its branches – as shown in the images below (*cf*. Figure 4 below). In particular, the images shown here can help to grasp the sense of movement and dynamism that is crucial to understand Matses children's daily lives and their modes of engaging with the environment, in a way that is not easily rendered through words but that is rendered graphically in the photographs.

Figure 4 – Children playing on trees

Source: Camilla Morelli, 2010

The photographs taken by Matses children when playing and enjoying their surrounding landscape thereby reveal their passion beyond words, showing that children's bodily engagement with trees is crucial to their process of learning and being in the world with others. And while the children would not articulate this through words and openly reflect upon it, this passion emerges vividly from the photographs – reinforcing again how the images can be taken as a form of child voice through which the children express what matters to them beyond words.

As suggested by Roland Barthes, photographs can only ever represent a fraction of the "vast disorder of objects" (2000: 6) that constitutes people's everyday life and which is much broader than what can be captured within the frames of an image. But when understood as entangled within a much wider network of other objects and actions, each detail or entity shown in a photograph also expands out and gestures towards the wider world that people inhabit, thereby revealing something about it. This helps to recognise that the photographed objects are embedded in a network of exchanges between people, whereby objects become "narratives of the social life of things" and "reaffirm the agency of those humans between which they pass" (Pinney 2002: 138). In this case, the trees that feature so prominently in the children's photographs gesture towards a social world that is predicated upon a daily and dynamic engagement with the rainforest environment, both for subsistence and recreation.

As such, the photographs taken by the children can have documentary relevance and they are likely to constitute important archival documents in the future. This is because these images reveal something of the world that Matses children experience on a daily basis, but which is likely to change substantially in the forthcoming years. Matses children are developing a real passion and craving for the outside world of *chotac*, or "non-Indigenous people" (Morelli 2015). This craving is leading to a substantial process of migration, with a growing number of Matses youth leaving their villages in the forest to settle in the city, where they are moving away from hunter-gatherer lifestyle and to become urban dwellers.

In the future, the photographs taken by the children themselves (and available to them) can provide a useful archive to document the social change that is taking place in their society. And whereas in traditional anthropology this documentary use of photography was conducted entirely from the viewpoint of the ethnographer, who took photographs from a colonialist gaze that attempted to salvage what was seen as a "disappearing world", here this archive is built by the children themselves – showing again how participatory photography can open up a pathway to foster ethical collaborations in research and to move away from traditional anthropological approaches.

The limits of child-centred methods

The use of visual methods in child-centred research is not free of challenges and pitfalls, and while non-verbal techniques have been much praised for their capacity to elicit children's views, they have been equally critiqued. For example, a number of researchers have pointed out that while granting children much freedom in choosing what to present, visual methods are always embedded in "relationships of power, authority, and difference [which] need to be acknowledged and integrated into the analysis" (Mitchell 2006: 70). The failure to acknowledge these relations of authority leads to a "much-romanticised assumption that photography empowers" (Fairey 2018: 111) instead of highlighting the complex power dynamic involved in producing, analysing and disseminating the images.

I fully recognise that while children can be engaged actively in the process of research production through the use of methods, such as participatory photography, it is much harder and perhaps impossible to engage them in the analysis, which remains a prerogative of the researcher. Whereas in my ongoing work with Amazonian youth I apply an entirely collaborative research approach that engages the participants from project design to output delivery (Morelli 2021), working with young children always requires much more input from my part and places in me in a position of greater authority and control.

Participatory and visual approaches also raise critical and ethical issues in terms of copyright and informed consent, which are especially delicate when they concern children[2]. Moreover, in the research with hunter-gatherer children and adults, the use of participatory photography and filming has also raised a series of critiques from anthropologists, who questioned whether a western technology that hunter-gatherer people are unfamiliar with can be suited to explore and render their ow worldviews (Boyer 2006: 52).

All of the above critiques raise important issues that require careful consideration. But all too often, the criticisms made to the use to visual and child-centred methods disregard the most important opinion to be taken into account: that of children themselves. Matses children have a true, profound passion for photography and other digital media, and participatory photography has the invaluable capacity of engaging them actively in the research process rather than as "objects" of research to be observed from an external, adult-centric viewpoint.

Moreover, the limited access to digital technologies is a major challenge for people living in remote and rural settings and especially for the younger generations, who are eager to access these technologies but have limited access to them. Matses children and youth often complain about having no access to electricity, smartphone, the Internet and digital media in their villages. This exclusion often leads to feeling cut out from desirable resources available in the wider world but precluded to them, and as they say themselves, it is one of the main reasons why a growing number of young Matses are leaving the forest and migrating to the city (as I have explored in a recent project with young Matses who have migrated to the city, cited above). Digital inclusion is indeed recognised as a crucial step towards development, with a number of research project and policy interventions focussed on it (Helsper 2012; Haenssgen 2018).

Besides moving beyond standard notions of child voice, using participatory photography and other visual media can also be seen by the research participants themselves as an opportunity to gain better access to digital technologies and thereby favour digital inclusion. During my last visit to the field, in 2019, a group of Matses leaders and schoolteachers asked me to collaborate with them and develop a new research project aimed precisely for their children to benefit from an enhanced access to digital technologies. This shows how the use of participatory methods can promote inclusive research in which children (and adults) are not just responding to pre-designed research projects but actively engaged in the whole process of research design, development and output delivery.

Conclusions

Visual and non-standard methods of research can be not only helpful but even necessary when working with children, as it is widely recognised by social scientists working with them. In my fieldwork in Amazonia, visual methods including drawing, participatory photography and filming were crucial for me to set up an ethical and collaborative relationship with Matses children and to start engaging with them even before I could speak Matses language. I realised from early on that such methods stimulated children's enthusiasms and participation far more than standard, word-based techniques, and as such they allowed me to develop a collaborative and child-centred approach where children could be actively engaged in the research process.

Drawing on my experience, in this article I have suggested that participatory photography can help researchers move beyond the notion of child voice intended as a form of expression that is

limited to word and speech, and to explore realms of knowledge and modes of communication that are not often articulated through words. Using visual methods seems particularly relevant in the research conducted with children in rural and hunter-gatherer societies, offering a way to move beyond the adult-centric view from above that remains somewhat predominant in these studies. This is because of this research focuses on childhood as a social category, exploring issues such as child rearing practices, family relationships and parenting, with limited attention paid to children's own voices, imaginations, worldviews and knowledge. The use of participatory photography can critically expand this research, and it can do so by promoting ethical and collaborative work that engages children actively in the process.

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Notes

1 The Matses are an Indigenous group numbering between 2000 and 3000 individuals, who occupy a contiguous territory in eastern Peru and western Brazil (my research took place in a village on the Peruvian side). In-depth accounts on their recent history are offered by Romanoff (1984) and Fleck (2003).

2 In my fieldwork I obtained consent from all parents and children to both use photography during research and reproduce the images shown here, and made all visual material available to the participants as much as possible. Matses parents themselves often asked me to take pictures of the children so that, as they said, they will have memories and a visual testimony of their childhoods in the future.