How to Guide

Visualising Security

A Photovoice project to Visualise Security

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Introduction

Thanks for taking the time to read this guide for undertaking the 'photovoice' method to gather people's perspectives on issues of (in)security. The method has been piloted by the University of Coventry's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, which are the research partner of Rethinking Security for the Alternative Security Review (ASR).

What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory arts-based method of gathering data which works on the basis that the world in which we live is unstructured and sometimes there are no simple ways to understand an issue. Thus, using visual methods makes it possible to express ideas in innovative, instinctive, often radically new ways.

The three expressed aims of photovoice are:
1. to enable people to record and reflect on strengths and concerns,
2. to promote critical dialogue,[1] and
3. to reach policy-makers

Understanding different perspectives of security often necessitate different ways of gathering knowledge. As part of our research into understanding security, we wrote a review of why different methods are important to building up a picture of human security. We identified that visual methods act as a fantastic way of starting conversations about security at the personal level, as well as offering a positive illustration of the many security challenges we face as a society.

Additionally, through using visual approaches, the barriers to verbal/written communication and language also disappear. This allows those who may feel less confident in contributing to discussions to engage in a different manner.

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[1] Wang & Burris 1997

What does photovoice look like?

This guide will take you through the four steps of photovoice to take forward discussions about security. In short, the steps are as follows:

Step 1 – Getting the Participants: Recruiting adults over the age of 18 through an open application process.

Step 2 – The Briefing: Inform participants about what they must do.

Step 3 – Taking photos: Normally a two-week timeframe where participants will take photos on the topic "what does security mean for me?"

Step 4 – Group discussion and feedback: Sending pictures to the coordinators to inform group discussion about the photos with each other and the coordinating team.

The rest of this 'how to' guide explains these steps in more detail:

Step 1: Getting the participants

The most important aspect of photovoice is having a cohort of willing volunteers to take photos. We engaged with adults over the age of 18 and recruited them through an open application advertised through CTPSR's official social media feed, complemented by contacting team members' networks and displaying flyers in public spaces. This mix of social media, physical leaflets and word of mouth gained interest in the project. Figures 1 and 2 overleaf are examples of what we used.

As you can see, we used a QR code. This allowed those with mobile phones to link straight through to the registration form (without having to type it into a web browser). This is not essential, and an email address, link to an online form or phone number should suffice (though we do not advocate sharing your personal details here) especially if you are reaching out to people and groups that know do not know.

Figure 1: Small flyer

Figure 2: One-pager

We recommend that a group size of between 7-10 is optimal. If, however, you have more willing participants, you may wish to run it as one large group (time pressures may necessitate this), though you may wish to extend the time of the focus group, or have more than one facilitator in order to manage the larger size, or running more than one discussion.

In addition, please bear in mind that applicants come from all walks of life. As a result, it is important to stay away from the assumption that all participants are able-bodied and have no health impairments. Please take time to check with applicants if there is anything they need in order to feel safe and participate fully.

Step 2: The briefing

Once you have your participants, it is time for the briefing. This is when the terms and conditions of the project are communicated to participants so that by the end they are in no doubt as to what is expected from them, what they can expect from you, and what will happen with the photos they produce.

Booking a room/venue

To ensure inclusivity, it is important to have the briefing in an easily accessible place. Alternatively, if participants wish, it is possible to have the briefing online (through Zoom for instance), as this is a predominantly information-sharing process. You can also use this space to ensure that participants have the necessary technology (a camera), and are capable of using it in this context.

What to say/hand out in the briefing?

We designed a briefing to hand out to all participants. This acts as a 'script' that can be used for the briefing (see Box A below). Primarily, the briefing is to ask participants to be engaged in the process but to follow some basic guidelines when taking photos. In the briefing, ask participants not to place themselves in any danger, or attempt to take a photo in a sensitive situation where taking a photograph may inflame tensions. Should participants wish to represent such a situation, ask them to draw a picture and take a photo of it as a submission. The briefing is to provide clarity: Participants need to be clear on the timetable and deadlines, how many photos they are being asked to take, and any guarantees of anonymity (should they wish to contribute anonymously).

In addition, it is worth deciding at an early stage what you will do with the photos and records of the group discussions. You may want to consider:

- How you will save the images, discussion notes or audio before sending them to Rethinking Security so that they can be included in the Alternative Security Review. (You will be able to upload them via a secure online form.
- If you will also publish them locally.
- If photos are to be shared online among local groups or your own network.

All of the above options have a particular approach to how the photos are used, and it is worth explaining this to participants so they give informed consent. Rethinking Security will provide a consent form.

Also, it is important to note that the photos taken by a participant and used within the project fall under shared copyright. On the one hand, participants give informed consent that researchers and Rethinking Security are allowed to use their photos in project-related publications and presentations. On the other hand, participants are also free to use their photos outside of the project (e.g. in their social media or at their own exhibitions), even if they personally decide to remain anonymous within the project.

Additionally, it will be important to have a secure space in which to store all the photos (a password protected file, for instance), as well as an idea of a potential date when you will archive or delete data you hold. Rethinking Security will keep any published outputs in perpetuity but will archive/delete other data within 10 years. Finally, it is worth at this stage pointing out that the photos will not be used beyond this particular project.

Box A: Briefing notes for participants

Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you very much for taking part in our project, 'Visualising Security'. We will ask you to take ideally up to 5 photographs within a 1 or 2-week timeframe that gives your answer to the question: "what does security mean for me"? Before starting to take the photographs, please read through this handout that gives you some essential information.

We are looking for what people understand security to be – **we are not specifically looking for risk factors, dangers or threats**. As mentioned in the information sheet, if a situation is too sensitive yet you want to include it within the project, **please do not risk your safety by taking a photograph but rather draw the scene** and use that as your picture.

If people are identifiable in your picture, please ask them if they consent to be included. If you cannot get this, then assume that the person did not give consent and blur out their face. In case of underage (under 18) children visible on the photographs, please automatically blur out the face.
While taking photographs in public areas, please respect other people's privacy and personal space. Please do not take any photographs of anyone without their willingness and permission, and do not take photographs in a situation where it could cause disturbance (for example during a religious service or a formal event).

Please be aware of local customs around photographing public buildings, places of worship, institutional settings, other peoples' children, etc. When in doubt, please rather do not take a photograph but substitute it with a drawing.
Thank you again for taking part in our project!

Yours faithfully,

Step 3 – Taking photos

Congratulations! Your participants have been recruited and are now out taking photos. At this stage, the participants are out on their own taking photos, but you will need to be able to respond to any questions they may have. It could be good to make participants aware of how quickly they can expect you to get back in touch with them (e.g. you may have family and work commitments which would slow down your response).
 Participants need to email their pictures to you. Make sure that you have a clear system in which to store the photographs to enable you to show them easily back to the group. Additionally, be prepared to anonymise photos that have been sent by participants (e.g. if the photos contain somebody who has not consented to be in the photo).
 Once pictures from a cohort of people arrive, time and a preferred format (e.g. in person or online) for the discussion group can be organised.

Step 4: Group discussion and Feeding back

Once all photos have been collected, it is time for a discussion with the group. Here, the same principles are followed in terms of finding a suitable venue. Also, consider an online focus group if necessary.

The aim of the discussion is to add stories behind the photographs in the form of dialogue. Focus groups should last about one hour and could be centred around the following points:

- Introductions and welcome from organisers.
- Participants introduce one or more photographs and explain the reasons for this choice.
- Participants choose a photo (theirs excluded) from the group that they can relate to the most (both in a cognitive and an emotional way). Here, it needs to be stated that the goal is not to find one "winner" but to look for multiple layers, interpretations and connections between people's submissions.
- Give participants the opportunity to comment on any shared themes or contrasts that they notice.
- Participants recommend ways in which the security issues mentioned during the conversation could be addressed at the 1) individual/community level, 2) council/local government level, or 3) national level.

It is suggested that the discussions are 'semi-structured' (i.e. it is no problem to slightly deviate from the above guidelines). This is partly because in a lively conversation, sometimes certain aspects receive more natural attention and engagement by the people than others, and it is not only OK but also useful to understand what people's thoughts are.

Also, if any technical or organisational difficulty occurs, the focus group can still work out in a slightly modified form. For example, if a participant agrees to come to a focus group but a last-minute issue prevents them from attending, it is better to go along with the focus group rather than try to reschedule. As for the missing person, they can come to a separate one-to-one interview with the facilitator where they can present their photos. This is not ideal, as the participant loses the opportunity to comment on other people's photos, but at least their own work isn't lost for the project.

The same applies to the situation where (in the case of an online discussion) technical difficulties prevent one or more participants from full engagement in the discussion and/or a presentation of their photos.

Facilitation

The facilitator's role is to provide the space for people to tell the stories of their photos. It's worth stressing from the beginning that this is not about the quality of photographs, but the stories they tell. Try to make it clear that there is no right answer, ensuring that everyone has space to contribute and no views are marginalised or belittled.

Making notes or transcribing

At Coventry, we audio-recorded our focus groups (with the permission of the participants), and then transcribed the audio. We understand however that this is time intensive but where there is interesting discussion it can be helpful to have a full record. Instead, consider having one member of the organising team lead the discussion, and one other (possibly two) taking notes. These can be used to inform any further writing (also do not be afraid to ask participants to repeat something they said if it sounded important!).

Anonymity

Rethinking Security would like to feature images and what they mean to participants as part of the Alternative Security Review project. However, we understand that some people may not want to be identified. That is OK. Please check with your participants if they are happy to be identified or if they wish to remain anonymous in any publication. In your discussion write-up, you can anonymise by giving numbers to the participants at the beginning, and this being reflected in the writing (e.g. 'participant 4 said…'), or that you keep descriptions generic ('one participant reflected that…').

Finish and follow up

At the end of the focus group, it is good to outline what the next steps are. For instance, if the images and discussion records will be sent to Rethinking Security and how they will be used. And/or whether you plan to use them locally. It could be worth sharing notes with participants first, to check they are happy with them.

Thank you for participating!

Finally, thank you for participating in the Visualising Security project. Photovoice is a recognised way of allowing people of all backgrounds and abilities to have their say, in a way that can sometimes say so much more than words.

We believe that allowing people to define how they see (in)security will be a powerful way of sharing concerns about safety and security as part of the Alternative Security Review and we are excited about seeing what is contributed to this project.

We hope you find that the images and discussions are useful locally, too, and spark some meaningful conversations that you can develop into something more.