Children in Transition: Visual Methods for Capturing Impressions of Food Landscapes, Family, and Life among Homeless Youth

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Children living in homelessness and displacement have been exhibiting an elegance of resiliency that has been palpable from the first day of our weekly after-school program workshops at a New York City transitional shelter over the last year. Our research takes the perspective that children have a unique capacity to express their knowledge and impressions about the everyday violence of poverty, displacement, family, identity, and the urban food landscape as active participatory agents. In our research, it is evident that visual anthropology methods are relevant, creative, and transformative tools that children can use for their agentic and hopeful expressions living in marginalized interactive spaces.

Historically, much of the research on childhood diet, health and nutrition to date has relied heavily upon quantitative methods. For instance, 24-hour dietary recalls and food frequency questionnaires provide mere “snapshots” of food landscapes, knowledge, and behaviors. With children undergoing marked developmental stages of language, cognition, and agency, we as anthropologists can develop more relevant and sensitive methods to allow children to express themselves in ways that are otherwise difficult only through verbalizations and observed actions.

Visual methods such as photovoice, photo-narratives, or photo-elicitation (Greene et al. 2014; Johnson et al. 2012; Pfister et al. 2014), can be used to go beyond a monolithic, static misperception of homelessness in America and begin to reveal the diversity of lived experiences, resiliency and coping strategies of those children in their own voices. This includes their use in community-based participatory research (Wang 2006). The primary strength of these techniques is to bring attention to the need for the inclusion of children as active participants and co-creators of knowledge in anthropological research on childhood through the use of visual methods to document their experiences. As part of our pilot public health and nutritional anthropology research project, 18 children (9 boys and 9 girls, ages 10-15) living in transitional housing are expressing their voices and are contributing to the creation of policies and interventions designed to more effectively respond to their unique needs (during weekly workshops led by trained MPH student Kamran Daravi).

Given that most homeless children face vulnerabilities and challenges, our project takes a strengths- and rights-based approach to co-creating engaging and enlivening techniques and incentives that build upon children’s resiliency and sensitivity to their social vulnerabilities. Our after-school project began with a workshop on basic photography, followed by directions on the use of disposable cameras (we are now using digital cameras). Children were instructed to select and frame subjects that could be linked via theme-based prompts to issues related to their life in transitional spaces.

Figure 1. Pot of beans photographed by a 15-year-old boy. "That's healthy...it's relatively easy to get because they're at every store. Beans...It's cheaper. Relatively cheaper" (13-year-old brother of the photographer).
These issues included patterns of food access, healthy eating, and conveyances of vulnerability, resiliency and coping strategies. This participatory, collaborative anthropology project, which started out with children taking disposable camera photos, has metamorphosed into an experiential, personal methodology where children are taking digital photos, making videos, and taking part in creating writing workshops to articulate their daily lived experiences.

Moreover, we deem it critical to highlight the ethics of such research. Child participation in public health and nutritional anthropology research in the US has been largely excluded for several reasons, including issues of privacy and legality. Particular care has been taken to protect not only the anonymity of the participants’ narratives but also the identification of all subjects and contexts documented in each visual image linked to the narratives. The sensitivity to this issue is especially heightened when working with such highly vulnerable displaced populations.

As an example, one narrative was in response to a photo taken by a 15-year-old male of a pot of beans that his mother was making (Figure 1). His 13-year-old brother said, “That’s healthy...it’s relatively easy to get because they’re at every store. Beans... it’s cheaper. Relatively cheaper.” Another photo taken by the same individual of an apple pie made together with his mother and brother (Figure 2) elicited the following narrative from him: “That was apple pie we made with fresh apples and dough that we made, we made ourselves.” His brother stated, “Cooking together helps the family bond more. And the fact that the camera is there shows that we have a hobby that can distract us.”

These short food, cooking, and family vignettes demonstrate how visual methodologies that incorporate voice and narratives provide an enhanced inclusive understanding of experiences and challenges of children. They provide opportunities for youth to present their counter-narratives of vulnerability, resiliency, health challenges, and the complex sociocultural, environmental and political contexts of their local food landscapes. Children can thus re-imagine places and spaces in their own voices, using cameras and the creative writing process. Overall, the use of visual methods can be a platform for their empowerment and right to contribute to the development of their community and themselves.

**REFERENCES**


