

Volume 30 Issue 2

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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THROUGH PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY

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*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/  
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*  
Editor-in-Chief: Nancy Taber  
Special Edition Editors: Shauna Butterwick and Carole Roy  
[www.cjsae-rceea.ca](http://www.cjsae-rceea.ca)

30,2 August/août 2018, 101-114  
ISSN1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes  
[www.casae-aceea.ca](http://www.casae-aceea.ca)

## **MIGRANT WOMEN LEARNING AND TEACHING THROUGH PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY**

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### **Abstract**

*International migration continues to rise at unprecedented rates exceeding the growth of the world's population (United Nations, 2017). This vast movement of people influences social, economic, and political systems in complex ways, including interpersonal and international gender relations. In this article, we discuss two studies that involved participatory photography with women in Nova Scotia who had recently immigrated to Canada: "Refugees Learning and Storytelling through Participatory Photography" (2013–2015) and "Refugees/ Immigrants and Refugee Claimants: Negotiating Place and Perceptions" (2015–2017). Using a feminist theoretical perspective, we examined the participants' photographs and transcripts of meetings to identify the women's learning processes. We conclude with our reflections on the impact that these arts-based projects had on participants and the wider community; namely, that participatory photography can enhance our collective understanding of migration, including the gendered realities of migration.*

### **Résumé**

*La croissance de la migration internationale continue d'accélérer à un rythme sans précédent, le nombre de personnes migrantes dépassant maintenant la croissance de la population mondiale (Nations Unies, 2017). L'envergure de ce mouvement de personnes exerce une influence complexe sur les systèmes social, économique et politique, dont les relations de genre à la fois interpersonnelles et internationales. Dans le présent article, nous examinons deux études portant sur la photographie participative avec des femmes vivant en Nouvelle-Écosse ayant récemment immigré au Canada : « La photographie participative comme méthode d'apprentissage et de*

*conte chez les personnes réfugiées » (2013-2015) et « Personnes réfugiées/migrantes et qui demandent l'asile : la négociation des lieux et des perceptions » (2015-2017). À partir d'une perspective théorique féministe, nous avons analysé les photographies des participantes et les transcriptions des rencontres pour cerner les processus d'apprentissage des femmes. Nous terminons en présentant nos réflexions concernant l'impact de ces projets artistiques sur les participantes et sur la communauté plus large et en affirmant que la photographie participative peut élargir notre compréhension collective de la migration et des réalités genrées de celle-ci.*

### Introduction

International migration continues to rise at unprecedented rates exceeding the growth of the world's population (United Nations, 2017). In 2015, there were over 244 million international migrants, an increase of 71 million since 2000 (United Nations, 2015). This vast movement of people influences social, economic, and political systems in complex ways, including interpersonal and international gender relations.

Women comprise 48% of the world's migrants and are greatly contributing to changing demographics around the world (United Nations, 2017). Fifty-one percent of international migrants in North America are women, a percentage that has remained consistent for the past 20 years (United Nations, 2017). Over 20% of Canadians are foreign-born, with projections suggesting that by 2031 over 27% of women in Canada will be immigrants (Chui, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2011). Considering that over half of the immigrant women in Canada are visible minorities and that immigrants, particularly refugees (Morrice, 2013), are often treated as a homogeneous group, it is imperative that we employ feminist and intersectional analyses of migration policies and processes to fill gaps in our collective understanding of migration, and particularly the gendered realities of migration (Chui, 2011). A feminist theoretical perspective emphasizes that to analyze women's experiences, it is necessary to recognize "the intersectionality of social divisions grounded by relationships of power" (Wright & Wright, 2013, p. 4). Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), is a lens that examines the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and other social divisions.

The research was oriented toward social impact and embraced the social justice principles embedded in adult education. Thus, we agree with Cohen's (2016) declaration, which although specific to refugees, could also refer to immigrants in general:

After [refugees'] flight to Canada, those seeking safety in our country should expect that we will do as much as we possibly can to better understand the complex nature and interactions of race, culture, gender, and religion so that future refugees to Canada will not know the bigotry and alienation previously experienced by many who have come before.  
(p. xi)

In this article, we discuss two studies that involved participatory photography with women in Nova Scotia with immigration experience: "Refugees Learning and Storytelling through Participatory Photography" (2013–2015) and "Refugees/Immigrants and Refugee Claimants: Negotiating Place and Perceptions" (2015–2017). Using examples from the data

and a feminist theoretical perspective, we examined the participants' photographs and transcripts of meetings to identify the women's learning processes. We conclude with our reflections on the impact that these arts-based projects had on participants and the wider community.

### **Who We Are**

Susan M. Brigham, principal investigator of both studies, is a professor at Mount Saint Vincent University and has been researching migration with a particular focus on women migrants for over 20 years. Being from an immigrant family who settled in the Maritimes and having taught abroad on several continents, she developed a keen interest in understanding migration experiences as impacted by immigration policies. Catherine Baillie Abidi has been working in the area of forced migration for 20 years, largely with the Canadian Red Cross, and is currently a part-time faculty member at Mount Saint Vincent University. Sylvia Calatayud is a professional photographer who immigrated to Nova Scotia from Mexico in 2001. She has been working with immigrants from many backgrounds, sharing experiences and stories and helping newly arrived people to integrate into their new communities.<sup>1</sup>

The research participants were from diverse countries of origin; spoke multiple languages, including English; practised many religions; and came from varying family structures. In the first project, "Refugees Learning and Storytelling through Participatory Photography" (2013–2015), 10 men and women who were refugee claimants, refugees, or immigrants participated in the research every three weeks for over 16 months. They ranged in age from their early 20s to their late 50s. In the second project, "Refugees/Immigrants and Refugee Claimants: Negotiating Place and Perceptions" (2015–2017), we involved 15 young immigrant and refugee women who met every three to four weeks for two years. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 40. While the commonality among all participants was their international migration, the participants' experiences varied in this regard.

### **The Participatory Photography Research Projects**

In both projects, the questions and outcomes of the research were co-developed with the participants within the broad area of migration and settlement. The participants for each project were recruited through word of mouth and through posters that we put up in public libraries, at settlement and community organizations, and at the Refugee Clinic. The general purpose of these projects was for participants to learn photography skills as a way to share their ideas and feelings and to tell their settlement stories. This necessitated discussions and storytelling as they reflected on their own photostories and expressed their interpretation in the research group.

1 Other research assistants included David Neilsen, Zainab Al-habibi, and Yuhui Zhang.

## The Research Method: Participatory Photography

### *Why Photography?*

Photographic images have the potential to freeze moments that have passed and preserve them as memories, giving us a sense of control and power (Berman, 1993; Sontag, 1990). The medium is an appealing tool for communicating, expressing feelings, sharing experiences, forming and maintaining relationships, and capturing our environment. Taking and sharing photos has become easier, particularly since the emergence of social media and ready access to devices with cameras. This has facilitated the production and dissemination of images, helping people document their private lives. At the same time, the “advances of the Internet, social media, and digital photography have forever altered cultural connections to photographs, and by extension, photovoice research” (Creighton et al., 2018, p. 447). Unauthorized dissemination of digital images raises ethical concerns for researchers using photography in their research methods. Ethical considerations related to our research are discussed below.

Photographs can function as mirrors reflecting our cultural identity and history, and personal snapshots can trigger memories that are beyond the viewer’s awareness, tell stories, and share secrets (see Berman, 1993; Kraus & Fryrear, 1983; Weiser, 2014). Yet even though photographs are used as evidence of the existence of people or objects or of the occurrence of an event, people are increasingly aware that photos are subjected to the photographer’s framing, lighting, and composition and the viewer’s interpretation. Therefore, photographs have multiple meanings (see Barthes, 1980; Sontag, 1990; Strunken & Cartwright, 2001), and they act not just on mechanical and cognitive levels, but also on an emotional level. The political, cultural, and social environments where the image was taken and viewed influence its meanings. Strunken and Cartwright (2001) affirmed that this process is frequently unconscious and related to our cultural codes, since we relate images to conventional representation embedded within our culture. We usually visualize our experiences and thoughts first as images before putting them into words, and this is affected by our knowledge and beliefs (Berger, 1972); our way of learning is also influenced by the way we see and how we deconstruct our experiences.

### *Participatory Photography*

Participatory photography is a research method that emphasizes artmaking, specifically visual images, as a means by which participants name their realities, tell their stories, and create awareness of their experiences and circumstances within a group, and possibly with a wider audience. With the aim to develop self-awareness and collective knowledge, participatory photography is a valuable research method for researchers and educators working with marginalized groups (Prins, 2010), such as social and ethnic groups (Gotschi, Delve, & Freyer, 2009), and “for participants and researchers who do not all speak the same languages” (Brigham, 2015). The knowledge-generating capacity of this method offers valuable opportunities to expand the depth and breadth of research participants’ voices and revitalize “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Prins, 2010, p. 5). This method also reflects “the principles of feminist theory, specifically that no one is in a better position to study and understand the issues of a group than are the people within that

group, and that discovery is best promoted through shared experience” (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004, p. 49).

While some use the terms *photovoice* and *participatory photography* interchangeably, we do not. Photovoice, a term introduced by Wang and Burris (1994), is like participatory photography in that it is participatory and the participants are co-researchers in the process and have control over representations of the study, yet photovoice is committed to system-level changes for its participants. We did not presume this as a goal of the participants; rather, participants chose if and how they would reach policy makers and others. We believe that if no system-level changes occurred, participants could feel powerless and distrustful of the researchers and the project.

The participatory photography method involves careful attention to complex ethical issues. In this study, consent involved several layers: (1) before the research process began, participants signed an initial consent form; (2) throughout the research, participants gave ongoing consent and were assured by the researcher that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or penalty and that their contributions (e.g., photographs) would also be excluded from the study; (3) participants were required to get consent from non-research participants who were photographed by the participants for this study; and (4) participants had to give consent for their photographs to be used for dissemination of this research, including public exhibitions, presentations, and publications.

### ***The Research Process***

The research team began the research projects with a conversation with participants about ethics, including the ethics of photography; i.e. the need to ask for the consent of others when taking a photo of others, the process for peripheral consent to share photos of people not directly involved in the research process, and ethical imagery guidelines. As a group of co-inquirers, we created a list of agreed-upon “community standards” that guided our interactions within the group. Both the ethics and the community standards were reviewed regularly throughout the research process. Each participant had access to a camera, batteries, a camera case, and an SD memory card. Over the course of the project, mainly in the beginning, participants received instructions on photography skills by Sylvia, who, as noted above, is a professional photographer. Participants practised their skills during the sessions and on their own time. At each session, participants generated ideas for the themes of photography homework.

Participants chose which photos were important to them, such as the ones that brought up memories or were related to their daily lives, and then edited them (i.e., altered lighting and cropped images) (see Figure 1). Their self-selected photos were downloaded and then either projected onto a screen or developed at an instant photo-developing kiosk prior to the editing process. The editing process was also an opportunity to promote reflection, conversation, and learning among the participants. The participants decided the form their edited photos and stories took and if and where their photos would be shared.



Figure 1. The individual editing process within participatory photography—sorting, organizing, and selecting photos (2015). Photo © Catherine Baillie Abidi.



Figure 2. Sharing group reflections—collaborative processes in participatory photography (2013). Photo © David Neilsen.

For the public photo displays, enlargements were developed and framed and participants wrote captions for each of their photos. Through discussion, questioning, and critical reflection within the group, participants engaged in an analysis of their lives, individually and collectively (see Figure 2). All group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. The research data consisted of the transcripts and photographs. In terms of analysis of the data,



Figure 3. A public presentation of the research process and findings (2016). Photo © Susan M. Brigham.

the participants and researchers identified key themes emerging from the photographs and transcripts of meetings. Participants in both projects decided to have public events to showcase their work. These events included live storytelling circles where participants read their stories as their photos were displayed, then engaged in conversations with the audience following the presentation (see Figure 3); a readers' theatre performance, co-written by a few of the participants, where participants performed a script consisting of a thematic merging of the participants' voices; and photography displays at universities, public libraries, art galleries, community centres, academic conferences, and the annual Alexa McDonough Institute's Girls Conference in Halifax. The photography displays were multi-day exhibits of the participants' photos and accompanying story captions.

### Analysis and Findings

As we, the authors, developed the research projects, we recognized that migrant women play key roles in the social, political, and economic landscapes of countries of origin and countries of destination, affirming the findings of the 2004 United Nations report on the role of women in international migration (United Nations, 2006). We acknowledged that despite women making up 48% of the world's international migrants, limited migration research has been conducted from a gendered or feminist perspective (United Nations, 2006, 2015). Considering "gender is a core organizing principle of social relations, including hierarchical relations, in all societies... a gender perspective acknowledges the influence of gender inequalities that exist in both origin and destination countries" (United Nations, 2006, p. 1).

For the purpose of this article, the authors examined the data from the two projects through a feminist lens, which enabled us to identify and critique social inequalities as they manifest in the lives of women migrants in both public and private spaces. Hyndman (2000) argued that a feminist lens involves "analyses and political interventions that address the unequal and often violent relationships among people based on real or perceived differences" (p. 210). In this regard, gender is an essential element to consider in the context of international migration, as it is a key feature in the complex and intersecting asymmetrical social power relations embedded in society.

### Toward a Gender Analysis

Within adult education, a feminist analysis critiques the patriarchal structures influencing and shaping how we live and learn. A feminist adult education perspective emphasizes the gendered elements of migration and learning journeys to expose opportunities for social transformation. While gender behaviours, practices, and expectations vary regionally and contextually, a gendered analysis is “essential to understanding both the causes and consequences of international migration” as well as understanding the resiliencies and vulnerabilities experienced throughout migration and settlement processes (United Nations, 2006, p. iii).

The participants in our research projects had the opportunity to express their multiple and intersectional identities through photos analyzed through their cultural and social lens. Intersectionality is a concept central to much feminist scholarship, which recognizes that gender, race, class, age, ability, nationality, and sexuality identities intersect and/or interact (Crenshaw, 1989). An intersectional analysis requires examining the permutations and combinations of the factors that affect an individual’s experiences. The participants’ photos are representations of their interpretations and perspectives of their own lives and immigration experiences. By documenting their lives through images, they discovered personal symbols and metaphors. For example, Silvia,<sup>2</sup> a participant in the first project, said this about her photo (see Figure 4):

This photo was taken during a road trip to Lunenburg [Nova Scotia]. My friend was returning to Japan to care for her mother who had cancer. We decided to take a trip to spend time together before she left. We took our friend’s dog with us. The photo makes me both sad and happy. It is a nice memory with my friend but it also reminds me how much I miss her. The photo represents friendship but also the separation of friends. For me, the lighting represents day and night, or two time zones. The lighting symbolizes separation and loneliness. Sometimes I feel like the puppy, sad and wishing I was with my friend.

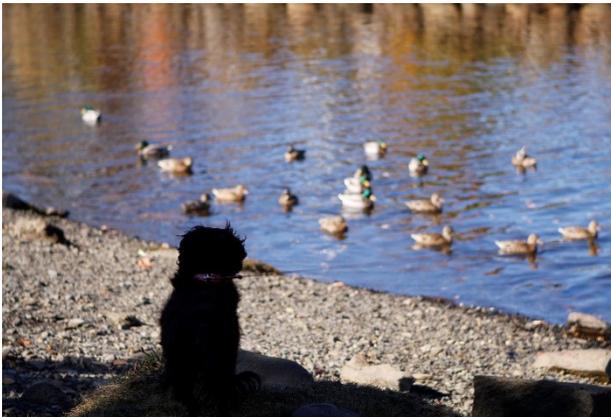


Figure 4. *The Road Trip* (2013). Photo © Silvia.

2 Participants chose the name by which they wanted to be referred; some chose pseudonyms and some chose to use their real names.



Figure 5. *The Plant* (2017). Photo © Yanery.

Yanery, a participant from the second project, also referred to several metaphors relating to the risks and constraints of migration when she described a photo she took of a plant growing in a bottle (see Figure 5):

That plant has a long story...As you can see, the pot is full of roots so she doesn't have a chance to grow any more. It's restricted...and all that restrict[ion] represents something for me...I took the photo thinking how difficult it is to move from one place to the other place. So if I take the plant and I put [it] outside that space...what maybe could happen with her? So instead of mov[ing] the plant, I tried to accommodate her, and I have her in a particular place in which she is happy...But I'm thinking, if I broke the glass and I put her in another glass, maybe she would die because she's absolutely happy there. And it's like a kind of bonsai without intention.

Yanery's story reminds us of how "adjustment to new socio-cultural environments can be difficult for women migrants due to general constraints and personal barriers" (United Nations, 2006, p. 63). For our participants, constraints and personal barriers included a lack of fluency in English, having to develop a sense of belonging in a new environment, having to establish new friendships and social networks, facing unemployment due to a lack of acceptance of their credentials received outside of Canada, and having to formulate and reformulate their identities based on the social context. Additional personal constraints included "painful separations, loss of loved ones and long lasting anxiety" (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Zhang, 2018, p. 18).

Photographs often triggered participants' memories of what was left behind, allowing them to integrate their experiences before and after immigration and to express feelings that were difficult to put in words. For example, Ran, a participant from the first project, showed a photo of herself with three other women and stated: "It is very important to have women around." Her husband Kul, also a participant in the first project, added:



Figure 6. *Self-Portrait* (2015). Photo © Rebecca.

Back home and in the refugee camp, women had less chance to get together because they were busy with tasks at home. Traditionally, and it is a true story, women stay at home and look after the kids and men work outside the home. Slowly we get better. In Canada, now we were separated into three families. Now we have a lot of time. And she is going out for herself. This is something she is learning here.

Ran's experiences remind us of the ways in which international migration "profoundly affects gender relations, at both household and community levels, in complex ways" (United Nations, 2006, p. 62). "Migration is a gendered phenomenon, embedded within patriarchal structures and social relations that extend beyond State borders" (Brigham et al., 2018, p. 1). Migration for women brings different challenges and possibilities. Social, political, and economic circumstances, as well as family and societal structures, affect women's settlement processes. Not all migrant women experience the same barriers and opportunities. Their experiences are affected by intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and other social divisions, including their immigration status, family status, and access to social networks. Additionally, some women may face differing levels of systematic barriers such as sexism, racism, and homophobia.

The opportunity to produce their photographic images fostered the development of critical reflection and enhanced the participants' ability to challenge stereotypes and assumptions. Rebecca, a participant in the second project, highlighted the transformative processes embedded in migration and the learning processes that can stem from participatory photography (see Figure 6).

Okay, with this picture I love the smiling face I have on it...It make me take life in a different angle. Life can be so devastating now and you can feel happy at some point. And coming to Canada was one of the exciting thing...and this [is] what this picture really reflects because I came to Canada and now...I have that opportunity to pursue what I wanted...Life sometime make you feel good at some point. And in this picture, I was really so excited taking pictures because I think my level of stress is kind of reduced now if I compare...[with] my previous life and what I have



Figure 7. *My Project* (2015). Photo © Honorine.

now. I feel like I'm a different person and I love that I have achieved. And with that you have to at least appreciate something and yeah, it shows how I perceive life and I appreciate it now.

In this research, personal narratives promoted feelings of solidarity when individual research participants realized that they were not alone and could learn from one another. "Oppressed people are able to create their own sphere of theorized existence, and thus remove themselves from marginalized positions to which the dominant society has relegated them" (Amoah, 1997, p. 85). This is possible when women validate their own and each other's strengths, develop support systems, break out of isolation, and find possibilities for growth (Espin, 1994). Personal stories are influenced by our multiple cultural identities and social constructions of our reality (Espin, 1999).

Honorine shared a photograph of handmade bags, slippers, jewelry, and purses of colourful patterned fabrics made by some of the women who remain in the refugee camp that she left (see Figure 7). She explained:

This means a lot to me. It is part of me. It's my project...I have some women back home from where I come from like widow women and... like those who...have children...I was like buying things from them and selling [these things] out. And I'm still doing that here too. I tell them to make things and I buy them and bring them here and I sell too, like to help them. Because if they don't do things like that they end up prostituting...So, for...refugees [who] have like many children...some of their husband died in time of war so they don't have any source of money. So, if I get something from this, it helps that woman to work hard and think that she can make it without a man and she can live through what she is receiving and what she is doing using her own hands.

Honorine's story reflects the United Nation's (2006) recognition of the importance of women in diaspora communities supporting women in their countries of origin. It also highlights an example of the gendered experiences of refugees and the collective agency

women have to create alternative ways of living and earning through, as in this example, sewing and selling handmade items.

Migration usually comes with ruptures in life narratives and losses of all sorts, "including the loss of place and self-representation" (Kemer Furman, 2005, p. 94). Storytelling brings the possibility to pull out the lost pieces and fill out the forgotten gaps, giving participants the opportunity to gain a sense of control and authorship of their own lives. Photographic images enable immigrants to construct multiple life plots and better understand their complex and multiple identities. English is a second language for the majority of the participants in this research, and photographic images helped them to tell their own stories and create their own plots.

### **Concluding Reflections**

Arts-based research is empowering and provides a way to tell stories from a personal perspective. It also honours different ways of learning and facilitating dialogue. Participatory photography drew on participants' emotions, creativity, imagination, intuition, and experience, and helped most of the participants develop deeper awareness and reflection of the meaning of their lived experience. Additionally, sharing stories and photos in public spaces opened new possibilities for individual and social transformation.

Participatory photography also inspired spaces where Canadians could listen, engage, learn, and grow in a manner that reached the heart and emphasized our shared humanity. By sharing their photographs and stories in different ways and in different venues, the participants raised awareness of the complexity of migration with different audiences. In the storytelling circles, audience members were able to ask questions of the participants, and through those discussions gained a better understanding of individual migration experiences and the differences between terms such as *refugee* and *refugee claimants/asylum seekers*, as well as *government-assisted* and *privately sponsored refugees*. Some audience members mentioned they had never met a refugee in person before, so this face-to-face interaction was significant for them.

This kind of arts-based research served as an advocacy tool to create social change. For example, some of the participants in the first project shared their stories and photos with several political leaders. The participants highlighted the importance of community gardens in their settlement experiences (i.e., the mental and physical health benefits of gardening, gardens as places where Elders could teach others about gardening and about medicinal herbs, and gardens as spaces where they could interact with Canadians who are established in the community). A member of the Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia was touched by this story and afterward gave an additional free space for another community garden in her riding for newly arrived immigrants and Canadians. A group of participants continues to push for more free spaces for more community gardens. Additionally, the participant photostories were shared with pre-service and practising teachers, which exposed teachers to a broader understanding of immigration and how they as teachers can be better prepared for teaching in increasingly diverse classrooms. In these ways, our participatory research has been successful because of our collective focus on building relationships while honouring the knowledge and experience of new Nova Scotians.

The feminist approach of the research required a constant dialogue between researchers and participants, allowing the exchange of knowledge and experience. In the research

process, the participants took ownership of the study, deciding its direction, themes, and creative ways to present their work to the public. Additionally, it required that we not rush the process. The willingness of participants to engage in the process and to commit a significant amount of time to the project was what helped make the research process a success. Each project involved hundreds of hours together developing a sense of community and a safe space for storytelling and sharing personal photos. In her reflections of the process, a participant, Yanery, summed up the value of the process for her, which we feel is a testament to participatory photography in general. She said:

As a whole, the interaction with people is for me...the main value because I took the pictures and conceived an idea in my mind, how I will show the picture to the rest of the group, and how I will express what I have in mind. [Then]...we start to interact, and...when you start to express your story...that starts to promote...feelings...and from there you start to connect and you start to create another story...and from there you start to narrate things that you never had a chance to identify before.... The collective [part] is the best part because people add more and more ideas...

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