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Photographs and Stories: Ethics, Benefits and Dilemmas of Using Participant Photography with Black Middle-Class Male Youth

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Abstract

Drawing upon research conducted with Black American middle-class youth in a secondary school, this article highlights the use of participant photography with Black male youth. Participant photography is a visual method that places the power of photo documentation in the hands of research subjects, empowering them to document and reflect on social issues and cultural phenomena important to them. This article highlights the significance of the method when exploring the understudied lives of Black middle-class males, ethical considerations of using visual methods with youth populations, as well as the benefits and dilemmas of engaging Black male youth in participant photography. Visual and narrative data produced from the participant photography project are used to highlight the benefits and ethical dilemmas of the method when working with Black male middle-class youth.

Keywords: participant photography, Black males, middle-class, youth culture

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Introduction

Participant photography (Clover, 2006, Daniels, 2003) is a visual method in which

research participants are encouraged to visually document their social landscapes through

photography and reflect on their photos to produce personal narratives, a technique that can be

particularly empowering for human populations whose voice has been historically marginalized

(Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty, 2006, Wang, 2003). Often referred to as photovoice (Wang and

Burris, 1997, Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001), reflexive photography (Ziller, 1990), and

frequently using photo elicitation as part of its method (Harper, 1986, Collier and Collier, 1986),

participant photography situates research subjects as co-collaborators in the knowledge creation

process and provides the space and opportunity for people to reflect on issues concerning them

with intent to spark qualitative social transformation (Wang, 2003, Strack et al., 2004, Carlson et

al., 2006). As its intent suggests, participant photography is rooted in both Freirean and feminist

epistemology and methodologies. Its Freirean roots emphasize the use of participant generated

photographs that stimulate the critical reflection, counter-narratives, and the dialogic nature of

praxis necessary for social change (Freire, 1970). Simultaneously, participant photography's

feminist underpinnings are reflected in the method's privileging of the subjective experiential

standpoints of research participants (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002, Collins, 1990).

Participant photography has found use in an array of community settings and with

various human populations, including poor and homeless populations across the world (Killon

and Wang, 2000, Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty, 2006, Packard, 2008), youth populations

(Gonzalez, 2003, Moss, 1999, Tinkler, 2008, Joanou, 2009), and in rural and urban communities (Carlson et al., 2006, Mitchell et al., 2006, Wang and Burris, 1994). Additionally this approach has been adopted across multiple disciplines including sociology, health sciences (Miller and Happell, 2006, Ornelas et al., 2009, Wang, 2003) communications (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty, 2006), and education (Donoghue, 2007, Meo, 2010, Mitchell et al., 2006). However, very few studies have used this method when working with young Black male youth, and virtually no studies conduct participant photography with Black middle-class male youth.

This article will review my use of participant photography as a methodological component of a larger qualitative research study of Black middle-class male youth. A brief description of the overall research project will lead into a discussion of the ethical considerations and specific procedures of the visual component as well as the benefits and dilemmas of using participant photography with youth populations such as young Black males. Visual and narrative data produced from the participant photography method will be included to highlight both benefits and ethical dilemmas.

Description of Overall Research Project

In general, very few studies examine Black-middle-class schooling experiences (Ascher and Branch-Smith, 2005, Ferguson, 2001, Horvat and Antonio, 1999, Ogbu, 2003); most research on Black students only examines Black middle-class students peripherally. Even fewer studies examine Black middle-class males (Author, 2010), though Black male students, regardless of class standing still lag behind their white counterparts and Black women in terms of achievement scores and graduation rates (2003, Hallinan, 2001, Roach, 2001). The purpose of the overall research study was to examine Black middle-class male experiences in school,

including the various ways they resisted and accommodated the process of schooling. Guided by

Erickson's (1986) interpretive approach, qualitative methods of interviewing, participant

photography and field observations were utilized in this exploration.

Participants. Ten Black males were interviewed and observed in a United States, Pacific

west secondary school over the course of two school semesters. Of the ten young men, six were

middle-class and four were working-class (See Table 1). Though the focus of the study was on

the Black middle-class male experience, working-class males were included in the sample for

comparative analysis. By including both middle and working-class students in the study sample,

I was able to see if and how class mediated the experiences of Black males in a particular context

bounded by space and time. However, the data in this paper will largely reflect the middle-class

experience.

Table 1

Black Middle-Class Male Student Descriptors

Student Alias	Grade Level
Jamal Baker	Sophomore
Sean Strauss	Junior
Billy Anderson	Senior
Mark Thomas	Sophomore
Jayson Mensah	Senior
Rodney Howard	Senior

Defining the middle-class. To identify the middle-class participants, I adopted a

classification influenced by the work of Pattillo-McCoy (1999) whose seminal work

concentrated on Black middle-class performances. Through distributed personal information

surveys to the parents, middle-class participants were identified through a combination of five

criteria, which include 1) household income in relation to the state poverty line, 2) education

level of parent(s), 3) occupation of parent(s) (e.g. white collar vs. blue-collar), 4) residential

location and ownership (i.e. property values, renting vs. owning), as well as 5) social groups the

families were involved in (i.e. College fraternities/sororities, Jack and Jill, Mason's). This

information was largely collected through distributed personal information surveys. The

information from these surveys provided the objective and subjective dimensions necessary to

define the middle-class participants.

Data collection and analysis. Students were interviewed and observed over the course of

two school semesters. Interviewing was the primary method of data collection because of my

interest in people's stories. Open-ended structured and unstructured interviews were utilized

because they seemed the most prevalent and appropriate forms of ethnographic interviewing.

The male participants were involved in three separate formal interviews. The first interview

concentrated on the life history of the male students, which included questions about their

personal biographies and experiences in school from elementary to present. The second

interview was conducted around the photo documentaries they produced, allowing them

elaborate on the meanings of their images, providing insight into their lives as they interpret it.

The third interview asked the students to reflect on the meaning of their experiences as Black

male students, their views on race and their perceptions of manhood.

Observational data complimented the interview data as it allowed me to *see* how the boys

experience school. Observations were conducted at four different periods throughout the two

semesters. Each observational period lasted one week, spending the majority of the day at the

school site, and coincided with the interview schedules of the participants. Observations were

conducted within classrooms as well as in other school spaces. This included before, during and after school, during lunch, school rallies and assemblies, and school sporting events.

Along with the interviews, field notes were transcribed and data analysis was conducted using a qualitative interpretive approach (Erickson, 1986). Triangulation of analysis was built into the data collection process; as data was collected I constantly sought my other data sources (i.e. interviews, observations, school records and documents) to confirm or disconfirm any findings. Validation of data was established by identifying consistent interpretive patterns among the student, parent, and teacher narratives along with field notes. Additionally, validity of the accounts generated was established by returning to each of my subjects with descriptions of my final themes and overall findings, descriptions that they concurred with.

Ethnographic reflexivity. As a college educated, middle-class Black male, in my late 20's, my identity positions me dualistically as an insider and outsider with my subjects. I was an insider to the students because of my ties to their communities and social networks. The location of the study is a region that I grew up in; attending a rival high school in the district just a few miles down the road. As a self-proclaimed aficionado of Hip-Hop culture and familiar with the popular youth vernacular in the region, I spoke comfortably with the male students about music, sports, popular television shows, and girls.

I gained access to insider information resulting from shared cultural identity characteristics with the male students. However, these attributes were always dichotomized with my age, academic standing, and institutionalized position as researcher. Plainly stated, I was still the old guy from out of town who was doing research at school and carried a "grown-ups" messenger backpack. So in this sense, I existed less statically on the two extremes of insider or

outsider but more in a dialectical relationship of both. Agbu-Lughod (1990, 1991) identifies this position as the "halfie" where the researcher is both marginalized from the culture of study and apart of the culture at the same time.

Of course, my insider-outsider position highlights the inevitable cultural differences that exist between researcher and the researched can be a barrier to intersubjectivity (Clifford, 1988). Thus anything that is recorded and written by the researcher must always be viewed as partially correct or a "partial truth" (Clifford, 1986). Despite any effort of my own to privilege the voice of the insider and to make sense of cultural meaning, I am still limited by my own sense of interpretation and subjective position. I do not claim my observations, interviews, conversations, and interpretations are objective. To hide behind the guise of neutrality serves to ignore the relationship of power that ultimately favors the researcher at the time of textual composition and exhibits a disingenuous effort to represent the subject.

Preparing to Conduct Participant Photography: Ethical Considerations

As described, the current study was a qualitative project that included a visual approach to compliment and expand the participation of the students beyond the traditional interviews and field observations (Markwell, 2000, Clark and Zimmer, 2001, Meo, 2010). However, the theory of participant photography was consistent with the aims of the larger project to stimulate critical reflection among Black middle-class males and use their narratives to influence policy and practice at their school and other schools serving Black males. To begin the discussion on my particular use of participant photography, including its benefits and dilemmas, I first want to outline some ethical considerations when employing visual methods.

Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) highlight a set ethical considerations specific to researchers employing participatory visual methods: 1) individuals have a right to privacy in both private and public spaces, and though it may be legal to photograph someone in public, it may not be necessarily ethical; 2) participants need to understand and identify contexts in which consent is needed; 3) the safety of participants must be considered as photographs produced can cause embarrassment among those photographed and may cause retaliation towards the participant; 4) participants should own the prints and negatives they produce to prevent commercial exploitation and appropriation; and 5) researchers may intentionally or unintentionally influence the kind of images produced through the directions they provide to participants. Other researchers have provided additional ethical concerns including self-representation that mirrors dominant hegemonic representation (Joanou, 2009), the validity of participants 'informed' consent (Karlsson, 2001), and photography as a potential tool for surveillance (Prins, 2010).

Considering these ethical concerns, I attempted to provide as much clarity and protection to the participants as possible. All student participants and their parents signed letters of consent for their participation in the study, including participation in the visual component. In addition to routine explanations of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal rights, students and their parents were informed on how the photographs would be handled. Participants were first informed that in general, photographs that were taken would not be shared with anyone but the researcher. Photos were to be taken by participants, developed by the researcher, used for the interview, and then left with the student for their own use. A digital copy of the images remained on my password-protected computer until data analysis was completed and then were destroyed. Though the presentation of visual data was not a primary objective of the study, I

didn't want to lose an opportunity to include visual data into research reports. Anticipating this, an exception was built into the consent process requesting the use of certain photos that may reflect member-checked themes. Photos that were requested had to meet certain criteria such as: 1) images void of people and 2) images focused on events or objects that may include people who could be easily anonymized without altering to the photographic meaning. This approach to handling participant generated photographs also ensured that any illegal behaviors students documented would not be reproduced. I do however, recognize that complete anonymization of published, participant produced visual images is somewhat impossible (Clark, 2006) and will always be subject to ethical deliberation.

Out of the roughly 700 photographs taken, I requested ten photos that were approved by the participants. These ten photos were selected as they were the most common images produced among the young men and best represented some of the larger research findings. By selecting representative photos *after* member checking was completed, I was able to better ensure that the images reflected Black middle-class male interpretive reality. Other ethical considerations I encountered will be discussed throughout the remainder of this paper.

Procedures and Benefits of Participant Photography

All Black male students were provided digital cameras and were given broad and vague prompts asking them to take images of their social world. Simply explained to them: "if I were to hang out with you over the next few weeks, what would we see, who would we see, where would we go, and what would we do?" This method allowed the informants to represent their communities and lives through photographs in a manner that privileged the insider voice (Wang and Burris, 1994, Wang and Burris, 1997). I encouraged the students to see and use the camera

as if it were their own and not just a research tool to be used for my own benefit. I informed them that they were free to shoot anything they wanted, things they felt were important to document as well as anything they just wanted to shoot. Some of the most intriguing and discussion worthy photographs came from shots they took while "having nothing to do". I was intentional in limiting the direction given to the participants on how and what to shoot. Since the strength of the method lies in its ability to hear the voice of the research subject, I realized that providing too much direction would inevitably impose my idea of what was important enough to shoot.

The risks associated with limited shooting directions present both ethical and practical conundrums. Ethically speaking, little direction on what to shoot could lead to student participants shooting people, places or events that could be deemed dangerous or embarrassing. Of the little advice I provided them about their photography projects, I did warn them about being mindful of their own safety and to "be smart" about finding themselves in a position where the act of photographing could result in unnecessary conflict. On a practical level, providing minimal directions could have created apprehension among the students, causing them to take too few or no pictures at all; a situation that would severely limit the type of data collected and the empowering capabilities of the method.

The participants were given a month to shoot their personal photo documentaries upon which I returned to them, collected the cameras, printed the images onto 5x7 photo stock and met with them for a formal interview. Each student produced on average, 70 images. The photos were individually numbered for tracking purposes, then used to elicit narratives from the young men (Collier and Collier, 1986). At the beginning of this open-ended interview, students were asked to group the photos into categories as they saw fit. This allowed the interview to have some form of thematic focus that was determined by the students as well as streamlining the

process of discussing 70 photos in a single interview, particularly when many of the photos were repetitive shots (e.g. three shots of a park bench). The use of digital photography and the ability to take as many shots without worry of production costs surely influenced the number of images shot by the students (a few students shot over 100 images) and also may have accounted for many repeat shots. After grouping the photos into thematic groups, the general categories the students generated included school life, girls, fashion, sports, work, church life, and underground black markets. Each group of images was discussed image by image and students were asked to explain in detail the meanings of their photographs, providing deep and evocative insight into their lives. Stories arose that illuminated people, places, events and artifacts of significance as well as stories that elaborated on previous formal and informal interviews. The duration of the photo elicitation interviews were considerably longer than the traditional interview, spanning upwards of 2 hours as opposed to the typical hour-long interview session, and is consistent with other accounts of photo-interviews (Collier, 1967, Meo, 2010). The length of these interviews can largely be attributed to the richness of the student narratives.

The somewhat "hands off" approach I took in preparing the young men for their photo project and the proceeding photo elicitation interview also reveals how the students participated in the construction of knowledge and reshaped the research design. Participant photography positions research subjects as participants in the construction of knowledge (Freire, 1970, Wang and Burris, 1994, Wang and Burris, 1997), enabling them to determine what's important to study, and providing the researcher with a more emic viewpoint of the cultural phenomenon (Capello, 2005, Clark, 1999, Epstein et al., 2006). Subsequently, the photographs they produced influenced the research design by re-shaping initial research questions and ensuing structured interviews and field observations. I entered the project with an interest in understanding Black

middle-class male life through schooling, and had determined a priori what questions and observation settings I would use to obtain this understanding. However, by putting a camera in the hands of the Black male students, *they* determined what phenomena should be studied, what areas of Black middle-class male youth life should be explored, and what questions should be asked to gain this understanding. During the photo elicitation interview questions were not determined a priori but arose in response to the images they took. What was important for them to document trumped what was important for me to document, just as their interpretations trumped mine.

Some practitioners of participant photography argue that the use of reflexive photography, to some degree, levels the relationships of power between researcher and researched by including the participant into the research design and construction of knowledge (Packard, 2008, Warren, 2005). And though I recognize that the relationship between researcher and researched will rarely be completely level, as ultimately I am responsible for the overall design and composition of the study, the use of participant photography enabled these young men to act as researcher. The photographs they took and stories they shared appropriately shifted my observational lens allowing for new participant generated themes to emerge and find place in the process of analysis and written report.

For example, the participant photography project illuminated other elements of Black middle-class male youth culture including an emphasis on materiality and style. Black male youth are regularly seen on school campuses as trendsetters (Davis, 2001, Sewell, 1997), a status the middle-class males took pride in, particularly in regards to fashion. A significant amount of the photos taken by the participants were of material commodities such as clothing. Stylizing the body through clothes, accessories, or even haircuts were clearly of importance to these young

men. A particular article of clothing, popularized by urban basketball culture, was the Nike

Michael "Air" Jordan shoe. The importance placed on the Jordan shoe within Black male youth

culture makes owning a pair an authenticator of Black masculine cool (hooks, 2003, Majors and

Billson, 1992).

These shoes are considerably expensive, $150 - $300 a pair at the time of the study. This

is steep, even by middle-class standards, but the status the shoe provides amongst Black male

youth was enough to prompt middle-class students like Mark to seek the shoes through informal

peer underground markets. Mark explains this transaction and the significance of the shoe to

him:

Mark: These are my only pair of Jordans. Those are the good ones.

Researcher: Did you buy them yourself?

Mark: I bought them off a friend for a discount because they were used because those actually are out of stock. Those are the 10's, you can't find those anymore.

Researcher: How did he get a hold of them?

Mark: He bought them when they first came out

Researcher: So it seems like to have a pair of Jordans is like a special thing. Why, what makes it so?

Mark: Well, probably just because they're so expensive and so people see you in Jordans and they know you have some type of money.

Researcher: So even if you don't have the money, it is just kind of status?

Mark: Yeah definitely.

While Mark is an Air Jordan consumer in this underground market, Dontay, a working-class

student who participated in the study, and his brothers are sellers. During the photo elicitation

interview, he explains the process he undertook to obtain the coveted shoes upon their release at

a local mall and the strategy in making profit (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. On the left: Mark displays his shoe collection with the prized Jordan shoe in the left corner. On the right: the top view of the Nike Michael "Air" Jordan shoebox waiting to be sold.

> Researcher: Did they start selling them [the shoe] at a certain time?
>
> Dontay: 6:00 in the morning. The line starts way right here and reaches out right there at one o'clock in the morning…Alright, so this crowd is about…15 feet wide and then it was like all bunched up right here. And so the cops were getting irritated because the crowd kept getting closer and wider, closer and wider. And so at like 5:30 in the morning, they're like "we're not opening up the line until you guys get into single file." Nobody moved. All of a sudden VOOSH! The whole crowd just rushes inside the mall, just takes the mall by storm. You see the security guards just getting played. They ran over the security guards and right when they got inside, they just dispersed, all in different directions because three stores were selling them…By the time he [his brother] got there, they was all out of size ten and this was only a good 30, 45 seconds that he stood there. He had to go up to size 10 and a half and he got a size 11.
>
> Researcher: So he bought two?
>
> Dontay: Oh my brother, he's crazy. He works for them…he got like two more in his room, in the package, and these are the ones he is going to sell. He can sit on them for another month, you know what I mean? I saw them go on the Internet for $900.

As sellers in the underground market, Dontay and his brother obviously understand the basics of

a free market system. However, it is only the cultural significance of the Jordan shoe as a

signifier of Black masculine performance that makes these transactions possible. It is also why owning a pair becomes an important symbol of status within male youth culture and an important commodity used to establish a cool image for middle-class males like Mark.

Not only did images and stories like the one described influence the research design, but the power of introducing participant generated photos into the interview process stimulated rich discussions and critical insight into the complexities of young people's lives (Clarke-Ibañez, 2004, Hazel, 1995, Holliday, 2000).

Dilemmas of Participant Photography

Participant photography is a methodology of empowerment, one that makes research subjects active participants in the construction of knowledge while situating truth claims from a particular experiential standpoint (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002, Freire, 1970, Collins, 1990). These reasons make it ideal when working with marginalized or unaccounted for populations such as Black males. However, as with any developing method there were dilemmas with the use of this approach, some of which may be generalizable to other studies employing visual methods while some were specific to working with Black male youth.

Empowerment. While the intent of this method is to empower participants though their active participation, involvement in research design, and construction of knowledge, in some cases the method can be disempowering. Similar to Packard's (2008) work using participatory visual methods with a homeless population in Nashville, Tennessee, I too had the initial problem of helping students understand that their photographs and opinions on the photographs mattered. Some of the students felt that the shots they took weren't very good or had little value, a

perception I encouraged them to rethink. The vague shooting directions I provided may have caused their initial apprehension, as some were unsure of what I wanted them to shoot. And as a population whose voice is often left out in popular discourse, it was without surprise that the students felt their photographs were unimportant; the students seemed initially uncomfortable with the idea that someone would be interested in what they had to say.

In some ways, the ability for participants to feel empowered through this method is dependent on the commitment to social justice by the researcher. The method is not empowering in and of itself, but finds its power in the negotiation between the moral commitment of the researcher and the agency of the participant. In the current study, in order to "activate" participant photography as an empowering method, I had to convince my participants that their voices mattered by demonstrating my knowledge of the problems Black men face, showing deep interest in their well being and what they had to say, and conveying the social and political implications of not including the Black male voice into the public discourse on Black men and masculinity. Furthermore, it would be remiss of me to leave out that my identity as a Black male, and the level of insider status this identity provided me, also may have influenced the credibility I gained with the students and their willingness to trust that I was committed to advancing the lives of Black men.

Though the potential power of voice that participant photography provided these young Black men was initially uncomfortable, they soon embraced this sense of control and were able to capture images of their social landscapes, the social actors they regularly encounter, and the social issues and needs that were most salient to them. After the photo elicitation interviews, the young men expressed excitement over getting to share their stories and were hopeful that school teachers and administrators would understand them better. Even those who were "too cool" to

express their excitement had parents that contacted me after the photo elicitation interview to share how their sons were "on cloud nine the next day."

In many ways, the photo elicitation interviews can be seen as enabling and therapeutic. Additionally, as a structurally transformative form of empowerment, the results of the overall study, including narratives generated from the participant photography method, were disseminated to all teachers and administrators at the host school and were used to make change to teacher and counselor practice, discipline policies, and provide greater insight into Black middle-class male schooling and identity performances. Furthermore, the study results were also provided to and discussed with the male participants, enabling a critical examination of school resistance and heteronormative performances of Black masculinity (Warner, 1993, hooks, 2003, Majors and Billson, 1992) that can be both empowering and hindering to school and life success

Self-representation. Another dilemma visual methods, like participant photography, present is the issue of stereotypical self-representation. The lives of Black boys and men are often sensationalized within a hegemonic racist discourse and mediated by the state through discursive practices (Marriott, 1996, Foucault, 1979, Hall et al., 1978). As a result, media constructions of Black masculinity often represent Black boys and men as deviant, irresponsible, sexually superior but lazy and uneducable (Fujioka, 1999, Hall, 1993, Entman, 1990). And though participant photography provides Black male youth the opportunity to define themselves and their communities within and outside of such racist and gendered ideology, the method doesn't ensure that Black male youth won't visually represent themselves in ways consistent with dominant discourse on Black masculine performance.

In the current study, for example, many of the Black middle-class males sought to establish masculine coolness through heteronormative performances with female students. Like Rodney, these students self-identified as "ladies men" and made flirting with girls a high priority. Photographs were taken of various campus spaces including hallways, and the spaces in and around the cafeteria as domains that were important places of socializing, fraternizing, and heteronormative sexual performances. In describing his typical school day Jamal recounts his social priorities, one of which includes interacting with girls, pointing out in a series of photographs where exactly he meets up with different girls:

> I know there will be such-and-such girl, meet with her, go in [to class]. Come out of Driver's Education and I have Algebra II. So I go walking with her, see her, and then go to class…come out of Algebra II, walk with such-and-such, all the way to the lunch area and then I go meet my homies from basketball. Go eat, and we come out and we all talk to girls and then I go to my Chemistry class. Come out of Chemistry, talk to her and her...

Jamal's description of where he interacts with girls, gives meaning to the school hallways as one of many spaces on campus for gendered heteronormative sexual performances, a place where young men can demonstrate their sexual aptitude.

Field observations confirmed the gendered use of school hallways, documenting how the male students would position themselves on the photographed high traffic walls or tables near the cafeteria enabling them to call out to all the female students that crossed their way. Attending school sporting events, the male students hung out at the entrance ramp of the football stadium or near the front doors of the basketball gymnasium, watching and interacting with female students that passed by while keeping a semi-interested eye on the happenings of the game. Their photographs and interpretive narratives captured the school grounds as controlled spaces used as playgrounds of masculine posturing and sexual aggressiveness (Cousins, 1999, Larkin, 1994). The reputation of a "ladies man" achieved through sexually charged interactions with female

students were further validating signifiers of Black masculine heteronormative sexuality and positioned these middle-class males as cool among their peers.

On the surface, their heteronormative masculine performances do not seem unique. The argument could be made that many male adolescent youth take great interest in sexual exploration. However, these students are Black males and their performances of Black masculinity are always seen in relation to endemic racist stereotypes that include hyper-sexuality among others (Collins, 2004, Cooper, 2006, Ferber, 2007). Thus when they engage in sexually charged relations with women, and document such performances through participant photography, they do so at the risk of confirming preconceived racist notions of Black masculine identity.

Cultural considerations of using visual methods. While the uses of visual methods provide great opportunities for Black male youth expression, there were cultural issues I had to address in order for my visual project to produce meaningful results. Packard (2008) explains that the proliferation of low-cost cameras increases the viability of participant photography, as participants are more likely to be familiar with the technology. However, this assumes that despite the affordability of the technology, participants will find the cost-efficient versions (e.g. disposable cameras) stylistically and culturally appealing enough to engage in the technology. For example, in preparation for the current project, I conducted a pilot study where I distributed disposable cameras to Black and Latino(a) male and female high school students participating in a co-curricular identity development class. The girls in the pilot study all returned the cameras, using the entire roll of film. None of the boys completed the photodocumentary project because they saw the disposable cameras as not "cool enough." They were too embarrassed to display the

camera in front of their peers because it sent the message that they could not afford a better

camera. This logic was consistent with their own performances of masculinity that emphasized

the aesthetics of materiality, the acquisition of expensive clothes, shoes, and nice cars as a

symbolic representation of being successful. In many ways, their performances of masculinity

were consistent with the theory of cool pose (hooks, 2003, Majors and Billson, 1992), a

masculinity of resistance that sometimes emphasizes the stylized body (West, 1993) and the

acquisition and consumption of material goods as a way to self-determine.

     As a result of their resistance to this affordable technology, I decided to provide

moderately priced ($100 each) digital point and shoot cameras for the current research study.

When recruiting Black male participants, I initially struggled to find an adequate sample size.

However, as word spread across the school that I was providing digital cameras, and participants

already enrolled into the study where seen shooting around campus (meaning people could "see"

what kind of camera it was), the number of volunteers for the study increased dramatically from

four volunteers to twenty within a week's period. Wang and Burris (1997) point out that

"cameras are an unusually motivating and appealing tool for most people" (p. 372), but I would

argue that the *right* cameras can be motivating and appealing tools for young Black males. In this

particular attempt to use participant photography with Black males, the digital cameras were seen

as "cool" enough to affirm their masculine performances, warranting the youth cultural

acceptance of the technology for research use.

     Other challenges that needed to be addressed in this visual study included the total costs

of a visual project as well as leveraging accountability of the use of the digital cameras with

youth participation in the study. The overall cost of conducting a visual project is something that

researchers should consider when adopting photo and video documentary based research. In this

study, because I wanted students to have their own cameras, while also accounting for what kind of cameras would be culturally acceptable to the subjects, the visual portion of the project was costly, not including transcriptions costs. The cost of equipment will also have to be taken into account when deciding to what level of liability you will hold your research subjects to.

As a researcher working with youth populations and their families in a visual project, it's important to create a working relationship in which participants are comfortable and trusting of you and their involvement, without losing participants who may be uncomfortable with the financial liability of their participation. These are issues that must be considered and weighed; how much do you hold the participants financially accountable for the use of the technology while ensuring that you don't "turn off" participants from volunteering? This is something I had to consider and chose to release the student participants from any formal liability because I felt that this would deter students and their families from full participation in my study. Unfortunately, there was a casualty; of the ten digital cameras given out to the student participants, nine of them came back. The one missing camera was said to have been "loaned out to a cousin" who lost it. The mother of the participant, despite being on government assistance, volunteered to repay the cost of the camera. I accepted her repayment but not without considering who would be hurt more by the loss, a middle-class graduate student researcher or a working-class unemployed single parent. In the end, I felt that not accepting her repayment would cause the most damage to our interpersonal relationship as she made it clear that she would be offended if I did not allow her to "right a wrong". Nevertheless, this was a dilemma that I needed to address and should equally be considered by other researchers supplying costly technology to youth.

Conclusion

The ability of participant photography to illuminate cultural phenomena through visual documentation, and provide nuanced understanding of cultural performances and ideological standpoints through photo elicitation, speaks to its power and possibility as a qualitative method. As a result, the potential of participant photography should continue to be explored in future research on Black boys and men as a method that can create the necessary discursive space for interpretive standpoints of Black males.

As with any qualitative method there are ethics to consider, particularly when involving youth in photo documentation. Rights to privacy in public spaces, identifying when consent is needed, participant safety, image ownership, and researcher influence are all legitimate concerns researchers employing participant photography must consider. And though there are many benefits with using participant photography such as the involvement of the participant in the research design, illuminating cultural phenomenon from a unique experiential standpoint, empowering participants, and using participant photographs and narratives to initiate structural change, these benefits must be understood in relation to the method's dilemmas. Such dilemmas involve an examination of if and how participants are actually empowered through the method, the reality of stereotypical self-representation, and understanding how visual projects are made sense of within cultural contexts.

Still, as I have already suggested, the power of participant photography lies in its ability to situate Black males as knowledge creators by placing the power of photographic representation in their possession. Interjecting an emic standpoint into the discourse on Black male lived experiences provides opportunity for deeper insight and added complexity to our understanding of Black male identity, ideology and performances; a sense of understanding that

participant photography suggests can incite social consciousness and transformation in the lives

of Black boys and men.

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