Fotohistorias: Participatory Photography as a Methodology to Elicit the Life Experiences of Migrants

Katya Yefimova  Moriah Neils  Bryce Clayton Newell  Ricardo Gomez
Univ. of Washington  Univ. of Washington  Univ. of Washington  Univ. of Washington
kyefimova@gmail.com  neilsm@uw.edu  bnewell@uw.edu  rgomez@uw.edu

Abstract

This paper presents the rationale and deployment for a participatory photography approach to elicit the life experiences and worldviews of a community – in our case, undocumented Hispanic migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. The Fotohistorias participatory technique involves conducting interviews with potential participants, giving them digital cameras and asking them to take photos of their lives, followed by conversations with the participants about their photos and the experience of taking them. While offering a space for reflection, Fotohistorias explores how undocumented migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border express their identities and the reality of their everyday lives through the photos they take and the stories they tell. The project doesn’t just create an avenue for personal stories, it provides a framework for the elicitation and representation of cultural knowledge that might otherwise remain submerged in the narrative of migration from the perspective of the dominant culture.

1. Introduction

Figure 1: “Superhero.” Photo by Maria.

Question: Why did you take this picture?
Answer: This bus has a superhero drawn on it. When I saw it, I thought of my son. When you are a kid, you really want to believe in superheroes and everything they do, and that’s what I was remembering, that we have to be strong, because superheroes don’t exist. They don’t exist. We are on our own. We have to have our own goals. My own goal is to be with my kids. If I were a superhero, I would go flying all the way to my kids, but I cannot do that.

This is an excerpt from an interview with a Mexican woman at El Comedor, a shelter for undocumented migrants in the border town of Nogales, in Sonora, Mexico. The woman, whom we will call Maria to protect her identity, was recently deported after years of living in the United States, leaving behind her husband, and their three children. The children were all born in the U.S. and are therefore U.S. citizens. Maria shared the poignant meaning behind the photo above as part of Fotohistorias, a project designed to highlight the experiences of undocumented migrants, and to elicit their views on identity and culture using participatory photography.

Maria is one of thousands of people who cross the border from Mexico into the U.S. each year. Many do so illegally, without proper documentation or visas, hoping to find work and a better life in the U.S. The journey north is a dangerous one: Undocumented migrants are frequently robbed by thieves or detained and deported, in addition to being at risk of death from exposure to heat, cold, thirst, hunger, exhaustion and wild animal attacks. One report [1] estimated that a person crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without documentation today is 8 times more likely to die than about a decade ago. This increased risk is partly due to the tightening of border enforcement in and near urban areas – including an enlarged law enforcement presence and the construction of barriers – which has shifted migrant crossing into more remote and dangerous regions along the border.

An estimated 11.7 million undocumented migrants were living in U.S. in 2012 [2], but this number represents more than merely a statistic; it represents human beings with their own hopes, struggles and identities. Undocumented migrants perform important jobs in the agricultural, construction, food service, and domestic work industries. They contribute to the
American economy and society, often getting underpaid and enduring precarious work conditions. They also live on the margins of society, hiding in constant fear of being caught, deported, separated from their families and returned to a life with no economic future.

As part of a larger project on immigration and information, this study seeks to elicit and revalue the experiences of undocumented Hispanic migrants, unpacking their dreams and aspirations and rendering more visible their contributions to society through participatory photography. While offering a space for reflection, *Fotohistorias* explores how undocumented migrants express the reality of their everyday lives and identity through the photos they take and the stories they tell. The project doesn’t just create an avenue for the telling of personal stories; it also provides a framework for the elicitation and representation of cultural knowledge that might otherwise remain submerged in the dominant cultural narrative.

The technique used to conduct this research, participatory photography, involves placing digital cameras in the hands of participants, asking them to take photos over a period of time (in this case, a roughly 18-24 hour period), and having a conversation with them about their images. This dialogue in conjunction with reviewing the participants’ photographs often leads to further reflection and provides greater insight into their experiences.

Participatory photography is not a novel approach to working with marginalized populations. For example, researchers have used participatory photography to document the health and wellness needs of a homeless community [3], to allow Chinese rural women to express their needs to policymakers [4] and to gain insight into the lives of women living in domestic violence situations [5].

A number of studies specifically focus on the use of participatory photography with immigrant communities. Frohmann explores the meaning of violence in the lives of Mexican and South Asian immigrant women [5]. Kwok and Ku document the realities of Chinese women immigrants in Hong Kong [6]. Sutherland and Cheng aim to empower women immigrants in small Canadian cities [7]. Rhodes et al. assess sexual and alcohol risk behaviors among immigrant Latino men in U.S. [8]. Holgate et al. work with Kurdish workers in London who struggle to articulate their identities [9]. In each case, the photographs facilitated the exploration of the values and beliefs of these communities.

Drawing on our experience in Nogales, this paper explores the advantages and limitations of using participatory photography as an approach to work with undocumented migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. In Part 2, we present a review of literature on participatory photography, followed, in Part 3, by a description of our experience in Nogales. In Part 4, we present a discussion of key insights learned in the process and highlight some of the salient themes that emerged from migrants’ photos. We conclude in Part 5 with our thoughts about using participatory photography to elicit life experiences of marginalized populations and discuss future directions for research and intervention.

2. Literature review

While researchers have used photography for decades to gain rapport with communities and to elicit responses during interviews, the method traditionally involved images taken by the researchers. As photographic equipment became cheaper and easier to use, providing cameras to the participants themselves grew more common.

Participatory photography, as the technique became known, is inspired by sources as varied as feminist theory and popular education, among others. In “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Brazilian educator Paulo Freire says that photos can help people reflect on their own lived experiences and articulate their discontent and ideas for action [10]. In the context of feminist theory, participatory forms of photography provide an opportunity for the disempowered “to take up their own cameras and create photographs that can be used as auto-biographic artifacts in telling one’s story and finding voice” [11]. In traditional photography, dominant social forces may be reproduced while photographing people without the means to represent themselves [12]. Participatory photography gives marginalized groups the means to create self-representative images and show the reality of their everyday lives to others [11]. As McIntyre notes in her study of politically disenfranchised women in Belfast, participatory photography is about “disrupting stories told by mainstream media or those in power” [13].

Literature describes several different practices involving participatory photography. Most notably, health researcher Wang developed photovoice, a technique with three main goals: to empower participants to record their lives, to create dialogue about the community’s issues through group discussion, and to reach policymakers and inform the broader society about those issues [5].

Other terms used to describe participatory forms of photography include photo elicitation, photo stories, auto-documentary photography, and photo novella. In this paper, we’ll use participatory photography as an umbrella term encompassing techniques that may differ somewhat in methods and goals but center around research participants taking their own photos and then discussing them with the research team.

The varied language used to describe participatory photography suggests its adaptability to different types
of goals and communities [14]. The method has been used extensively with marginalized populations and with children [15,16,17,18,19]. In an example of using participatory photography in the context of education, Cappello conducted photo-elicitation interviews while studying the writing practices of children [20]. She writes that using photographs helped to engage the children and provided a window into the way they view the world.

Participatory photography works with children for some of the same reasons it works with marginalized groups: they are normally not encouraged to share their perspectives, and photography gives them a means to do so. For example, Lykes used participatory photography with the goal of empowering a community of indigenous women in Guatemala [21]. In a health context, where the technique was popularized by Wang’s work, Miller and Happell used participatory photography to explore the meaning of hope for people living with mental illness [22]. In another study, Fleury et al. employed the technique to explore the availability of resources for physical activity among Hispanic women [23].

2.1 Advantages of participatory photography

In each of the different settings described above, researchers consistently describe some of the following benefits of using participatory photography:

2.1.1. Discussing photographs during interviews helps elicit different types of responses. Clark-Ibanez writes that, with the use of photographs, respondents’ memories are stimulated in a different way than in verbal interviews [24]. Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck echo this finding: participatory photography interviews may spur meaning that otherwise would remain dormant [25]. The images may not contain new information but they trigger meaning for the interviewee. For example, a girl took photos of a tree she liked to look at from the window in her room. But the interview revealed a deeper meaning: the girl looked out at the tree because she wasn’t allowed to go outside for fear that she would be picked up by immigration authorities. The tree became a symbol of her status as an undocumented immigrant [24]. Likewise, in our study in Nogales, we found that participants often expressed varied meanings behind simple photographs when asked about their reasons for taking the images.

2.1.2. Participatory photography helps users gain perspective. Being able to see conditions and issues affecting participants turns abstract discussions into reality, and the images create “a new frame of reference” for both researchers and participants. In her work with a group of Mozambique farmers, Gotschi found that encouraging participants to discuss the images allows for conversations about sensitive topics, such as poor living conditions within the community and conflicts with local authorities [26].

According to Kolb, participatory photography interviews start an exchange of knowledge: “Researchers learn from respondents and photo interview participants take on the role of experts as they appraise their lives and communities” [27]. For example, photographs may provide data illuminating a subject invisible to the researcher but apparent to the interviewee, such as gang graffiti [24].

Researchers behind the camera often tend to capture “visually arresting” images (e.g., homeless person asleep near a school entrance) rather than what might be meaningful for the interview participants [28]. In participatory photography, the photographers have an opportunity to show and explain their lives to researchers.

2.1.3. Participatory photography shifts the balance of power. Participatory photography helps break down the traditional power dynamic between the researcher and the interviewee. The practice creates an opportunity for society’s most vulnerable members “to promote outsiders’ empathy – rather than paternalism, condescension or idealism – toward their lives” [4]. The method can challenge dominant ideas about what constitutes knowledge [29], as well as activate cultural knowledge.

In studies with marginalized groups that traditionally have been reluctant to become involved in academic research, participatory photography presents a culturally appropriate research model addressing issues like inequality and exploitation. For example, in a project with an indigenous community in Canada, where research has been associated with colonialism, participatory photography transferred some of the control over the research agenda to the participants, created a sense of ownership and built trust [19]. Using participatory photography becomes a collaborative process of negotiating and executing an agenda where participants have their own goals and aren’t treated merely as sources of information [30].

In some cases, having a camera around your neck is empowering in itself. In a study with a group of homeless people, wearing cameras enabled participants to pass as people with expendable income [3]. Wang writes in this study that strangers were more likely to strike up conversations with the participants and to treat them as equals. Given the social stigma around homelessness, the participants found this experience affirming.

2.1.4 Participatory photography enhances participants’ positive experiences with the project. Killion and Wang report that, while compensation helped sustain interest, people participated because
they found the project meaningful [31]. In their work with a homeless population, the researchers found that establishing relationships with other participants and social support from the group were among the most valuable project outcomes. Likewise, in a study of immigrant women in Canada, Sutherland and Cheng found that learning about other immigrant women's experiences in the process of group discussions empowered the participants, as they found out that they were not alone in their struggles [7].

2.2 Limitations of participatory photography

While much of the literature suggests participatory photography benefits both the researcher and the participant, it is important to acknowledge limitations of the method.

2.2.1. Unintended cultural implications. Participatory photography can have unintended consequences such as generating suspicion and embarrassment [32]. Working in a Salvadoran community, Prins found that participants’ attempts to take pictures made others in the community suspicious; as a result, participants were embarrassed at being rejected. Photography often is considered intrinsically liberating, but in today’s age of surveillance technologies, it can have an oppressive effect. In Prins’ case, community members were used to being cautious because they were used to the fear of being watched by the government. In fact, because many marginalized groups lack control of their own lives, trusting someone with a camera – even a member of their own community – can be a significant issue. Prins’ experience is a good reminder that cultural context matters.

Sometimes a community that researchers or activists think could benefit the most from participatory photography faces the hurdle of breaking social norms. Lykes encountered this in a study where Mayan women in Guatemala were reluctant to take pictures because they needed their husbands’ permission & because they were worried that others would judge them for taking pictures – something not viewed as an activity appropriate for women [21]. Breaking cultural and gender barriers can carry negative consequences for the participants, so researchers must evaluate this risk carefully.

2.2.2. Ethics and privacy. Recognizing the need to address ethics, researchers have asked participants to adhere to certain principles by providing culturally-appropriate guidelines and holding workshops. For example, Wang and Redwood-Jones in the Flint Photovoice project sought to instill respect for privacy and the laws that protect it [33]. They explained to participants that taking pictures in a public place without permission could be legal but, in some situations, not ethical. Other concerns include taking images that inadvertently reveal embarrassing facts or cast someone in a false light.

Wang echoed much of the literature when she emphasized that researchers must make every effort to make sure participants understand how the images would be used. She also noted that researchers must know of any potential risk or harm to participants or their community and take steps to safeguard participants’ well-being [3].

Studies tackle the issues of privacy and consent in different ways, depending on the context. Burke and Evans distributed consent forms to be signed and asked all participants to make sure no one who appeared in photographs could be identified [34]. Amerson and Livingston describe a study with nurses where, due to a language barrier, participants couldn’t obtain consent and were required to digitally alter photographs to obscure people’s faces [35].

2.2.3. Negative consequences. Participatory photography projects that aim to create social change could have negative outcomes if they fail to drum up public support and bring about change. That could leave participants feeling hopeless [36]. It’s important to understand – and to explain to everyone involved in the research – that such projects are not inherently empowering and do not end homelessness or violence against women [37]. In addition, Clover notes that, if the images are exhibited publicly, a disparaging remark could upset participants, who are not professional photographers and may feel ashamed about their lack of skill.

3. Participatory Photography at the U.S.-Mexico Border

For a few years before this study, we had been working with Hispanic migrants in Seattle, Wash., trying to understand their individual and cultural perspectives and experiences of transient existence: Being both at home and away from it at the same time. But in order to arrive in this place, migrants have to cross the border. The experience of being on the border and making the crossing is a pivotal moment where life is more precarious and transient than ever. Nogales, where the current study is based, is a city split in two by the border fence: Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora. Methodologically, we used participatory photography and follow-up interviews to allow us to capture and understand the migrants’ life experiences during some of their most vulnerable times: While receiving food and supplies at a migrant shelter just minutes from the border.

El Comedor, a nonprofit shelter in Nogales, Mexico, run by a coalition of Catholic organizations
from both sides of the border, was the home base for our project. The shelter serves a variety of undocumented migrants, both those recently deported back to Mexico after unsuccessfully trying to cross into the U.S., and those who are just arriving in Nogales and are getting ready to make the journey north. Most people are trying to cross the border illegally – without proper documentation – though the shelter helps people without asking questions. At least 100 people visit the nonprofit each day for a hot meal in a safe space, and a variety of complementary services, including phone calls, medical aid, clothes, check cashing and counseling.

We talked extensively with staff and volunteers and we also invited migrants to participate in *Fotohistorias*. As part of the project, we provided simple digital cameras and asked the participants to take pictures of their daily lives. We arranged to meet participants the following day to look at their images together using a laptop computer and to conduct semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews. As compensation, each participant got to keep the camera with his or her photos and a new backpack containing socks, toiletries and a snack.

### 3.1 The participatory photography experience

Participants were asked to take pictures that represent their daily lives in Nogales. Along with the cameras, participants received a set of 3-by-5-inch cards with instructions in Spanish on how to use the camera and what to photograph. The primary interviewer, a native Spanish speaker, spoke with each of the participants before they embarked on the project, explaining how the cameras work and the goals of the research. The interviewer also provided information about ethical concerns and was available to answer questions.

#### 3.1.1 Prompts. We tried out three different types of photo prompts for participants: broad, descriptive, and detailed:

- **The broad prompt**: “Take about 24 pictures throughout your day. Include at least one *selfie*. There are no wrong photographs! We will talk about whatever you bring back to share.”
- **The descriptive prompt**: “Take about 24 pictures that help to tell your story and that show who you are. Think about things that mean something to you, or represent your culture, your daily life, or your current situation. Include at least one *selfie*. There are no wrong photographs and we will talk about whatever you bring back to share.”
- **The detailed prompt** differed from the descriptive prompt in that it contained a specific list of ideas that they could use to take pictures of. These were as follows:
  1. A selfie
  2. Places you go
  3. Food you eat
  4. Your current home
  5. What you do during the day
  6. Your use of technology
  7. Something you really like
  8. Something you are proud of
  9. A person, place or thing that reminds you of home or family.
  10. A person, place or thing that gives you hope about the future
  11. A person, place or thing that you are afraid of
  12. A picture that tells your story.

Participants got to choose the prompt they preferred, and the majority chose the detailed list. We included a selfie in each prompt because we thought this informal self-portrait could show how the participants see and represent themselves. We pointed out that a selfie did not have to include their face, but could show other aspects that they felt were symbolic or representative such as their shadow, their shoes, etc.

Our intention with the different prompts was to evaluate what resonates most with the migrant community and to ensure that we had a variety of options. The literature runs the gamut on prompts, from the very general “Use the camera when it occurs to you” [38] to questions meant to provide structure for the photographs, such as this one: “What are the things, people and places I love?” [31]. Like Killion and Wang and other studies we reviewed, we gave minimal instructions regarding the content of the photographs so as not to influence participants’ choices.

#### 3.1.2. Instruction Cards. We provided instructions on how to use the cameras in the form of a deck of 14 flashcards. The design for the instructions was inspired by Fearless Cards, a set of Spanish-language instructions designed to teach people with low technical literacy to use email and do other simple computer tasks. Fearless Cards were made for Hispanic migrant day laborers in Seattle, and turned out to be highly effective ways to provide very basic technical training for extremely marginalized communities [39]. The numbered cards we created for *Fotohistorias* show step-by-step how to accomplish a task: taking pictures (three steps), reviewing pictures (four steps), and deleting pictures (nine steps!).
3.1.3. Ethical Guidelines. Drawing on other participatory photography studies [14,17,32,33], we wanted to include some ethical guidelines. We provided an instruction card with the “Ethical behavior for taking pictures.” Participants gladly used the card and some even reported showing it to people they approached for permission to take a picture.

This was the text on the card:

1. **Always ask permission** when taking pictures of people’s faces.
2. Try not to take pictures that might make you or someone else uncomfortable or embarrassed.
3. Try not to take pictures of something that could get you or others in trouble.
4. You can delete any pictures you prefer not to share, or just tell us when we talk later and we will delete them. We also won’t use any pictures that might embarrass anyone, or get anyone in trouble.

No other literature that we know of describes providing instructions cards, though a majority of the studies talk about holding workshops with participants beforehand to discuss ethics and teach them to use cameras. Photovoice studies especially tend to focus on workshops and group discussion because they have an educational component. We didn’t follow that process because El Comedor is a place of transition and we had limited time to build rapport with participants and explain the project to them, and protection of identity of participants was especially critical given their circumstances.

3.2 Photo-elicitation interviews

When participants returned with the cameras, we imported the images from the memory card to a digital photo frame and discussed them together with the participants, asking questions about each photo. Semi-structured interviews, conducted in Spanish, were recorded, transcribed and later analyzed for recurring themes and salient topics. The researcher first quickly looked over all of the images to get an idea of what was ahead and to verbally mark each photo for the audio recording. We chose interview questions intended to encourage participants to tell personal stories and to share knowledge outsiders wouldn’t have discovered otherwise.

Other researchers using participatory photography have used different kinds of prompts to elicit responses. The prompts mainly broke down into narrow and broad requests. In one example, participants were asked to choose to photos that best matched the description “home” [18]. Many studies partially incorporate questions that spell “SHOWed”:

- What do you **see** here?
- What is **happening** here?
- How does this relate to our **lives**?
- Why does this problem or this strength exist?
- What can we **do** about this?

This prompt is part of the formal Photovoice technique [3] and was part of our interview guide. Other debriefing questions included: “Why did you take this picture?”

- “What is in the picture?”
- “What else could this picture represent?”
- “Does this picture make you think of anything else?”
- “What has been left out of this photo?”

We also asked participants to choose photos that best match a certain description, like “the places where I feel safe,” and to choose images that best represent certain concepts, such as “home” or “family.”

Since these were semi-structured interviews, we wanted to allow the conversation to develop organically, to create a unique dialogue with each participant, allowing them to be the experts and to share their own, direct experience.

4. Discussion

We collected seven interviews and sets of photographs over a period of five days in Nogales. After the first interview, we realized that we needed to simplify the debriefing questions – the researcher was doing too much talking. It turned out that the participants were excited to share stories about their photographs and needed little prompting. In most cases, after asking, “What’s in this picture and why did you take it,” the researcher only needed to listen. Our semi-structured interview guide became even looser, and more participant-driven.

When it came to questions about what to photograph, participants preferred the prescriptive prompt and were least comfortable with the broad prompt. We underestimated participants’ skills when providing camera instructions: we assumed low levels of digital literacy; in reality, at least one of the participants had advanced computer skills and some of the others had experience with digital cameras. For example, El Chino, one of a group of men from...
Honduras, learned how to use the timer to take time-delayed photos of himself.

Before traveling to Nogales, we decided to bring a small printer so we could offer to print each participant’s favorite pictures. This turned out to be beneficial in two ways: participants loved getting mementos of their experience, and other people at the shelter felt encouraged to participate when they saw the photographs and the joy they were bringing. This tool was at least as effective at generating interest and catalyzing participation as we were providing the participants with backpacks with supplies.

4.1 Insights from the process

Interestingly, not all participants wanted a printed photo. A young man we’ll call Chapin (a slang term Guatemalans use to describe themselves) got online at a cybercafé in Nogales and uploaded his pictures to Facebook, which he uses regularly to stay in touch with family. Because of this digital backup, he expressed little need for a printed photograph. Chapin, who said he lived with his brother in New York for two years, was trying to make his way back to U.S. Likewise, a group of men we refer to as Catrachos (a nickname for Hondurans), who worked on the participatory project as a team, chose to upload their photos to Facebook rather than getting printed copies once they found out they would keep the camera and that they could take the memory card to the cybercafé.

The use of Facebook was somewhat of a surprise. Several participants acknowledged that Facebook could be a safe and convenient way to stay in touch with friends and family, yet not many routinely use the social networking site. Lack of reliable Internet access is one reason, but many people also said they simply never considered it. This insight, revealed in the course of Fotohistorias, was exactly the kind of information we were hoping to obtain. In the future, we would like to investigate the use of Facebook as part of the larger project with migrants. Using social media to communicate is particularly interesting considering how difficult it is to make a phone call on the border. Scam artists prey on migrants by loaning them a cell phone, dial the same number later and demand money from the migrant’s family under the pretense that he or she has been kidnapped. Humanitarian-aid organizations on the border educate new arrivals about the common scam and allow them to make free phone calls safely.

Recruiting participants at El Comedor turned out to be harder than we expected. Life on the border is precarious and migrants at the shelter have a lot to worry about. As a result, they may not know whether they would return to the shelter the following day.

Migrants’ precarious situations made participatory photography challenging in this setting, that’s why we were especially glad when participants reported a sense of pleasure, empowerment, and even peace from picking up the camera and talking about their pictures.

Life on the border is accompanied by waiting – waiting to cross, waiting for a guide, waiting for money from friends or family, or recovering from an injury. Participating in Fotohistorias provided a good distraction for that downtime and, in the words of Maria, a way to “reflect upon myself and this difficult situation that I’m in, in this moment of transition.”

4.2 Salient themes in the photographs by migrants

As we studied the photographs and listened to the interviews, we were able to trace four main themes that the participants highlighted. These four themes speak to the intense, precarious and transient experience they are in the midst of, but also to larger cultural values that exist outside of temporal or spatial limitations.

4.2.1. Family. Maria’s photo and poignant superhero quote featured in the introduction is a stark example of photographs devoted to the theme of family. In another image shared by Maria, two smiling girls sit next to each other at a picnic table, hugging. Maria explained the picture simply: “They remind me of my daughters. They are the same age, and they made me think of my daughters.” In another revealing testimony, a man we nicknamed Catracho, comments on a picture of Nogales, Mexico, taken from the U.S. side of the road sign: “I imagine when I come back, in a few years, driving my own car and towing a trailer with all the things I will have bought for my family, they will be crying of joy to see me return a successful man.”

4.2.2. Friendship. Finding someone to trust can be a breath of fresh air for migrants on the border, and many of the participants’ images reflected the theme of friendship. Maria took a picture of her three friends, Mexican women she met in detention. She asked us to print a copy of the photo for each of the women so they could have memories of the small moments of joy in the midst of all the upheaval in their lives. The snapshot evoked many emotions for Maria: “I was really happy to take their picture and, after all the terrible things we’ve been through, to see them smile. Even if we don’t know each other well, we know we are in the same boat. We have the same goals. We are women; we are mothers; we are Mexican Compañeras. That unites us.”

Others took pictures of their friends as well. Looking at his images, Chapin pointed out that “even though they are smiling, I know inside they are sad and worried.” The intensity of their border experiences made many participants form close friendships, even with the realization that intimacy might be short-lived. Jose’s quote sums this up: “I will never know whether
they made it or not, what happened to them, where they are. We are friends now but we will never meet again.”

4.2.3. The wall. We saw many photos of the wall. The constant presence of the fence that separates Nogales, Mexico, from Nogales, Arizona, looms large for the migrants. Most people we spoke to refer to the barrier as “the wall” and see it as the obstacle that separates them from their goal. Chapin took the photo below from the shelter where men spend the night. “If you come too close, it becomes insurmountable, but if you step away, you know you can overcome it,” he said. “To be in a place where I can reach my dreams, that’s what this picture makes me think of.”

Another participant, El Chino, took multiple photos of the wall with the desert in the background. He said he felt anxious sleeping right next to the wall, overlooking the rugged terrain that lay ahead. The interview revealed that he was worried about making the journey with a foot injury he suffered while trying to get on a train. One of his pictures shows him touching the wall for the first time: “I just wanted to jump over and cross, but I could see the Border Patrol in the distance, but it still felt good. It looks like something that’s going to be very hard to cross.” Participants see the wall as both a figurative barrier, and a symbol for the entire journey north, where making it across is just the first step.

4.2.4. Daily experiences. Most of the images we received document the daily lives of migrants on the border: A line of people waiting to get some soup from a church group, people sharing a meal and relaxing together, men getting ready to go to sleep. These photos give us a glimpse of the individual men and women behind the label “undocumented migrant.” Their feelings of safety and calm in the middle of a highly unstable environment emerged from these photos of seemingly simple everyday activities.

In some photos, like Maria’s superhero bus, the obvious subject matter doesn’t necessarily reflect what lies beneath the surface [40]. This is an example of photographs containing a deeper meaning to the participants that isn’t visible to the interviewer. Clark-Ibanez echoes this in her research with urban school children, where she writes that participants’ images contain information that isn’t obvious to the researchers [24]. Consider these two similar shots and the participants’ widely different stories about them:

Chapin took the photo in Figure 4 to represent his love for basketball: “I play a lot of basketball. It’s my passion. I see this basketball court, and it gives me a lot of anxiety because I don’t have a basketball. My feet are itching because I really like basketball and I can’t play it here.”

A man we nicknamed (the name of his home state in Mexico) was thinking of the cemetery behind the basketball court when he took the photo on Figure 5. He said “In the desert, I saw a lot of crosses, so maybe people who die are just left there. So I was thinking, it must be really sad to die in the desert. Your family doesn’t know and you don’t even have a coffin. You take the risk of going and sometimes you make it through, and sometimes you die – you can be bit a snake, stung by a spider, die of hunger or of thirst. I took this picture because you have to be a realist: You don’t know if you are going to make it, if they send you back or if you end up being a cross in the desert.”
5. Conclusion

Collier wrote more than half a century ago that photos do much more for research than simply illustrate [41]. That still holds true today, as we found in our participatory photography project with undocumented migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. A stepping-stone in our larger work with migrants, Fotohistorias became a way for this marginalized group of people to share their life experiences through taking pictures and telling stories. Participatory photography, in this context, presented some important benefits and elicited insightful information about how the participants experience life in the liminal spaces along the border, but it also presents some limitations. Our findings confirm that concerns described in the literature – privacy, ethics and potential negative outcomes like distrust from the community – are valid, at least in the context of our study. Still, we observed significant advantages: Our study resulted in empowerment and positive experiences for participants while the photo-elicitation interviews opened the doors to unique insights for our team. In particular, the photo elicitation interviews prompted very frank and often emotion-filled insights into the participants’ relationships with their families, new and old friendships, their daily experiences as migrants living temporarily at the U.S.-Mexico border, and their thoughts about an uncertain future.

6. References


