

Paper Abstract for the 8th Annual Liverpool Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management Sciences.

**"The Politics of Meaning-making / Meaning-breaking"**

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## **Visual and Creative Methods in Support of Ethnography: A Case Study with the Social Photo Matrix**

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate to the ethnographic researcher how the novel visual method called "Social Photo Matrix" (SPM) can be a helpful secondary tool within the ethnographic encounter for supporting findings from the field. It is especially relevant to this year's symposium theme, as one of the key discussions among practitioners centres on the question of meaning-making. Is the meaning of primary data gained during the SPM created and communicated by the photographer, the viewers, the evaluating researcher, or even the photo itself? Is the solution to talk about the intersubjectivity of meaning-making among all these parties, or would that result in the meaning-breaking for the actual photographer?

The proposed paper will a) describe the method of the SPM, b) show how it can be applied by the ethnographer to 'probe' interpretations of primary data and c) offer a critical reflection on such endeavour by sharing a case study from a consultancy project during which, among other research methods, a SPM was fruitfully conducted. That project aimed to establish an informed recommendation as to whether a collaboration between two local charities would be fruitful.

In line with the framing of this year's symposium, the SPM is designed to find depth underneath surface impressions. Bolas argues that pictures provide more insight into life than rational discussion, as they reveal part of the "unthought known" of the subjects' world (1987). In this sense, The SPM does not use photos as pieces of data, but as a means of generating new data - emphasis is not given to what is actually shown in the picture, but rather, to the meaning that the viewers attach to it.

The SPM was pioneered by Burkhard Sievers in 2005 and is a further development out of the combination of social dreaming and role analysis traditions. It is promoted as a means of getting „beneath the surface“ (Sievers, 2007). By coming together in a matrix, "out of which something new can grow as in a uterus" (Lawrence, 2005), participants are invited to share their free associations, amplifications and link without boundaries, what comes into their minds in view of the photographs. The aim is to expand their thinking, as the photographs capture both, a direct object as well as a memory of experience (Reynolds and Vince, 2007).

Undertaking a SPM comprises of three distinct phases. Participants are being given a theme and are instructed to take photographs of anything of their choice that is related to or resembles the theme visually. Participants need to understand that who took the photo, where and why will be irrelevant and any revealing information omitted. This is so as to pave the way for new meaning-making, although it has been experienced that for some participants, this has the opposite effect: meaning-breaking.

The second phase embodies the one hour free association session to a random selection of the taken photos. Throughout the matrix, participants are encouraged to let go of inhibitions as much as possible and to share freely, the associations they

make in view of the photos, cognitive ones and emotional ones, as well as amplifications and links that come to mind not only with regards to the photos, but also as responsive reactions to other participants' contributions.

In the third and final phase of the SPM, attention is shifted away from the photographs and towards the newly inspired thoughts and emotions that were provoked by them. Hereby, the participants and hosts turn towards each other in a circular set up so as to reflect together and exchange impressions gained in joint analysis.

There are many advantages for including the SPM in ethnographic research. This method turns every participant into a researcher. Power irregularities are minimised, if not overcome completely, as the researcher is 'degraded' to an initiator and host of the SPM. The participants in turn are assumed to be in no lesser position to produce meaning as is the researcher. These prevailing power structures have previously been a major point for critique of conventional social research methods (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005), and ethnographers have traditionally overcome such critique via the use of interviews.

In contrast to interviews, the SPM meets the need to overcome the limiting nature of language. As Crociani-Windland (2009) notes, the essence of what it means to be human and have human experience cannot be expressed with words alone. This is not to say though, that the photographs replace language; rather, they facilitate it and enforce the appearance of words in a so called „photo-text“ (Warren, 2005). As a result, the SPM offers to the ethnographer the possibility to „compare“ his or her own understanding against that of the participants who are subject to the research interest. This shared agency of sense-making can give the research more trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability (Guba, 1985).

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