MAT @ Medicine Anthropology Theory

PHOTO ESSAYS

Against Image Positivism

The Potentials for Play as a Mode of Health Research

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Abstract

Images are increasingly used in health research as a complement to discursive methods, to elicit more and different types of knowledge and experience from participants. The use of image-based research, such as drawing and photography, then, holds promises for understanding health in new ways. However, such promises fall short when researchers and audiences treat images as realist representations of participants' lives. Images are never clear representations of an objective reality- this is not their value either during or after research. In this photo essay, we show and discuss how we countered image positivism in the PHRAME study, Photographing Health by Rural Adolescents in the Midwest. The photos shown in this essay take viewers into our interviews in PHRAME and then out to our modes of audience engagement. Throughout, play served as a critical orientation and form of listening. We show this, first, through glimpses into our interviews, where we engaged in play that transformed meanings of photos taken by the young people. Then we show how we engaged public health, academic audiences, and popular audiences of the young people's photos in play where audiences were invited to co-produce meaning through interactive activities, rather than reading to extract meaning from the photos. In conclusion, we suggest that play as a mode of research and exchange holds transformative potential, taking health research beyond the image positivism that has constrained the methodology to expand visions of what health is and might be.

Keywords

Children's health, Play, Photo-elicitation, Participatory research, Rural health.



Figure 1: Four people ride bikes on a winding path surrounded by flowers and trees. One adult rides ahead on the path while the other is behind with two children sitting on the back of the bike.

A family rides bicycles in an idyllic rural setting. One adult is in the front. Another adult is behind, carrying the weight of two children, who sit passively at the back of the bike. This photo (Tubtawee 2017) runs the length of the landing page for Washington University's National Cancer Institute-funded Implementation Science Center for Cancer Control, on which I (Jean) have served in leadership and investigator roles. The photo aptly represents how this center aimed to promote community engagement in rural areas but did not consider children as active members of this community.

This positioning of children solely as recipients of adult care and health education is common in research. It leads to health programmes and policies that ignore children's experiences and foreclose more suitable solutions to health challenges (Hunleth 2017; Spray 2020). To bring children into the Center's work and counter adult-produced images of rural children, I designed the Photographing Health among Rural Adolescents in the Midwest (PHRAME) study.

PHRAME invited children in rural communities to photograph how they envisioned and enacted health and care. Such arts-based methods (depicted below) can prompt different interview conversations and offer one way to address—though not circumvent—power dynamics between adult researchers and young research participants.¹



Photographing Health by Rural Adolescents in the Midwest (PHRAME)

Questions? Need more information? https://is.gd/phrame Call 314-362-8200 or email phrame@wustl.edu



Figure 2: Still image from the PHRAME recruitment video providing background on the study's virtual and participatory methods.

¹ In anthropology of health and childhood, see Hunleth 2011, Faye 2019, and Spray 2021. In public health, photos generated by people with less power have been posed as a way to address more powerful audiences. See Wang and Burris 1997 on the photovoice method, an article that has been cited more than 7000 times to date and has given rise to numerous studies using the method as well as trainings on it.

Our challenge, then, was: How can we show child-produced photos in ways that compel audiences to look and listen? And how do we prompt audiences to question their assumptions about rural environments, childhoods, and health rather than reinforce them?

We offer one approach: playing with images.

Play as a mode of research

Images are never clear representations of an objective reality—this is not their value (Hunleth 2011; 2019). When anthropologists and health researchers view photographs as realist depictions of people's lives, they fall back on their social biases and expectations to make such interpretations legible (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996). We consider this *image positivism*, or the decontextualisation of images from the circumstances in which they are made and the rejection of images as artistic objects with multiple possible meanings (see James 2007 on text positivism, Hunleth 2011). An image positivist approach to the opening photo of people riding bikes through a field, for example, satisfies dominant ideals of rurality, family roles, and exercise as health.

In PHRAME, we resist image positivism through play.

We define play as 'an openness to being a fool . . . not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred' (Lugones 1987, 17) and an avenue for knowledge creation characterised by transformation (Schwartzman 1978; Hunleth 2019). Play as a mode of research invites researchers, participants, and audiences to play with images through stories, drawing, and more. Such play transforms participants' images to create new ways of looking at, reading, and listening to images.²

Play as a mode of research in PHRAME also offered opportunities for co-presence between researchers and participants during the COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated virtual, rather than in-person, interviews.³ Fifteen young people aged 8–14 participated in three Zoom interviews each, sharing photos and co-creating stories and art on health and care. (For more on methods, see Weidenman, Lee and Hunleth 2023.)

² For other ways researchers have used play in arts-based methods, see Spray 2021 and Lomax and Smith 2024, as well as our approach during a separate study (Spray, Fechtel and Hunleth 2022; Fechtel et al. 2023).

³ See also Spray, Fechtel and Hunleth 2022; Fechtel et al. 2023.

Consider Delphox⁴ (PHRAME participant) and Eric (interviewer):



Figure 3: Delphox's basketball photo.

Delphox shared two photos of himself playing basketball. The photos represented health, he explained, because basketball 'exercises your legs and arms.' When Eric displayed the photos on the Zoom screen, Delphox asked Eric to make a 'movie' of him shooting the ball. Eric clicked back and forth between the photos, and then Delphox explained that he asked his brothers to each take a photo so neither felt left out. The images transformed, telling a story of how Delphox cared for his family while they isolated to avoid COVID-19, a measure they took to protect his immunocompromised younger sister.

Now consider Cinderella:

⁴ All participants chose their own pseudonyms.



Figure 4: Cinderella's shoes.

Cinderella told Sienna that her shoes represented health because she used them to exercise and walk outside on a trail near her house. As Sienna drew the trail on the photo using Zoom's annotate function, Cinderella talked about consoling a friend while walking along the trail after her friend's father had died. Cinderella said this helped her friend and she got 'to know his personality and their relationship with each other.'

Now consider Rainbow Glitter Unicorn Sparkles:



Figure 5: Rainbow Glitter Unicorn Sparkles' car.

While Rainbow and her sister Noodles bantered, Sienna drew on a photo Rainbow had taken of an electric car that she connected to environmental health. Rainbow noticed Sienna drawing.

Rainbow: Can you give it wings?
Interviewer: Yes . . . where's this car flying to?
Rainbow: This car is flying to heaven . . .
Interviewer: Do you think health or care relate to heaven in anyway?
Rainbow: If you're good then you go there, and if you're bad then you don't. So you have to be good and healthy.
Interviewer: What does it mean to be good and healthy?

Rainbow: To eat stuff that would be good and healthy and sometimes eat nonhealthy stuff for a [treat] . . . And the car can talk by the way . . . It's saying 'Be healthy.'

In Delphox and Eric's encounter, we see both wisdom and delight (Lugones 1987), as the movie they create offers insight into Delphox's practices of care. Sienna, Rainbow, and Cinderella played with photos through imaginative drawing to transform their photos and co-create understandings of health as social connection, emotional attunement, and moralised behaviors.

Play as a mode of exchange

Play also extended to how we presented the young people's photographs to other researchers and publics.



Figure 6: Pages from the zine Play as a Mode of Research. See Hunleth 2023 for link.

We created zines⁵ to encourage what Max Liboiron terms 'reciprocal readings' (2020) of children's photographs, wherein readers slowly and deeply engage with a text. Interactive activities in the zines created a process of exchange where, instead of readers extracting meaning from images, they co-produced meaning through play.

Other play-filled forms of interacting with images included storymaps (Fig 7),⁶ installations (Fig 8),⁷ and creations we haven't even imagined (Fig 9) yet that are as dynamic as the images are themselves.

⁵ Our lab worked with zinester Dionisia Ruiz to bring the theory and images together into play-filled designs. See Hunleth 2023.

⁶ See PHRAME 2023.

⁷ The authors created an installation for the PHRAME zines and findings at the 2023 Visual Research Conference organized by the Society for Visual Anthropology. The installation included drawing activities, free zines, and bean bag chairs to showcase PHRAME findings for adult and child audiences.

Play as a mode of research and exchange is transformative, taking health research beyond the image positivism that has constrained its methodology and expanding visions of what health and care are and might be.

PHRAME	
✓ How do you use this tool?	
This image provides information on navigating this tool and some additional pieces of functionality including accessing map legends, icons, and additional information. For a PDF version of the content on this StoryMap, pleage use this <u>link</u> .	INTRODUCTION Review the content included in the introduction tab for project background, methods, objectives/aims, our recruitment video, and more!
> Introduction	Select your tab of interest to see more information!
> Methodology	
> Household and Family	(NARRATIVE PANE)
> Getting Outside	Read the narrative pane on the left side of the map for an overview of the topic and its themes pertaining to
> School and Community	health and care. If you are using a mobile device to view the map, click the information button to switch between the map view and the narrative view.
> Food & Nutrition	
> Physical Activity	(MAP POINTS)
> Animals	Click on an icon on the map to see a child's photo and read the associated story.
> Children's Care Work	
> Mental Health	(MAP DATA)
> COVID-19	The background data on the maps displays related county-level information. Click the legend icon to see details.
> About the Authors	

Figure 7: The storymap created by the PHRAME team. See PHRAME 2023 for link.



Figure 8: The PHRAME Installation for the 2023 Society for Visual Anthropology conference in Toronto.



Figure 9: Photo of trees reflected in a mirror taken by participant Noodles.

Authorship statement

Jean Hunleth: Drafting, reviewing and editing. Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal Analysis, Data curation, Conceptualisation.

Sienna Ruiz: Reviewing and editing. Image preparation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Data curation, Conceptualisation.

Ethics statement

The PHRAME study was approved by Washington University in St. Louis's Institutional Review Board (#202012006).

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