Humanitarian Storytelling through Photographs with and for Resettled Refugees in Wellington

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Abstract : This research project explores creative methods of storytelling through photography to portray a vulnerable and marginalised community: former refugees living in Wellington, New Zealand. The project explores photographic representational techniques that can not only empower and give voice to those communities but also challenge dominant stereotypes about refugees and support humanitarian actions. The aims of this study are to develop insights surrounding issues associated with the photographic representation of refugees and to explore the collaborative construction of possible counter-narratives that might lead to the formulation of a practice framework for representing refugees using photography. In other words, the goal of this study is to explore representational and narrative strategies that frame refugees as active community members and as individuals with specific histories and expertise. These counter-narratives will bring the diversity of refugees to the surface by offering personal stories, contextualising their experience, raising awareness about the plight and human rights of the refugee community in New Zealand, evoking empathy and, therefore, facilitating the process of social change. The study has designed a photographic narrative framework by determining effective methods of photo storytelling, framing, and aesthetic techniques, focusing on different ways of taking, selecting, editing and curating photographs. Photo elicitation interviews have been used to 'explore', 'produce' and 'co-curate' the counter-narrative along with participants. Photo elicitation is a qualitative research method that employs images to evoke data in order to find out how other people experience their world - the researcher shows photographs to the participant and asks open-ended questions to get them to talk about their life experiences and the world around them. The qualitative data have been collected and produced through interactions with four former refugees living in Wellington, New Zealand. In this way, this project offers a unique account of their conditions and basic knowledge about their living experience and their stories. The participants of this study have engaged with PhotoVoice, a photo elicitation methodology that employs photography and storytelling, to share activities, emotions, hopes, and aspects of their lived experiences. PhotoVoice was designed to empower members of marginalised populations. It involves a series of meeting sessions, in which participants share photographs they have taken and discuss stories about the photographs to identify, represent, and enhance the issues important to their lives and communities. Finally, the data provide a basis for systematically producing visual counter-narratives that highlight the experiences of former- refugees. By employing these methods, refugees can represent their world as well as interpret it. The process of developing this research framing has enabled the development of powerful counter-narratives that challenge prevailing stereotypical depictions which in turn have the potential to shape improved humanitarian outcomes, shifts in public attitudes and political perspectives in New Zealand.
Keywords : media, photography, refugees, photo-elicitation, storytelling