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Article

Pictorial meaning-making in a community project in Helsinki. Freirean interpretations of a dialogical process

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Abstract

Participation in public discourse belongs to a democratic citizenship. However, part of the population is excluded from such communal discussion. This paper describes how the photography group Camera Obs., which principally contained unemployed people in Helsinki, created pictorial voices from their own everyday experiences through a dialogical process, rendering them also visible to other people. The research focuses on the group's activity during the years 2004–6, from the beginning of the project to its first exhibition. As a theoretical background, Paulo Freire's ideas of dialogue and voice creation, combined with Vygotsky's and Mezirow's concept of meaning-making, have been applied. The research is conducted through a participatory action research approach. The material consists of observations, interviews and photos taken by the participants. In describing the advance of the meaning-making, the method of narrative change accounting is used. The paper concludes that the group, through reflective dialogue, created a pictorial voice about the lives and situations of its members. The photo exhibition of

Camera Obs. conveyed a powerful message about loneliness and isolation, which reached the spectators of the exhibition. To the participants of the group, the successful work in communal photography, as well as the reciprocity with the audience and the publicity that ensued, gave them the experience and courage to engage in this civic activity.

Keywords: community-based action; photo-taking methods; meaning-making; dialogue; Freirean pedagogy

Introduction

In 2004, before camera-phones, selfies and Facebook, some social workers in the Social Services of Helsinki City, their clients – mostly unemployed adults – and some voluntary workers set out to create more active and communicative practices for their social work. The result was a group of photographers, first called Camera Obscura and later Camera Obs.. It was formed with the aims of both observing the experiences of everyday realities and making them visible for others. The essence of Camera Obs. was pictorial citizenship discourse, which induces interaction about the experience of everyday life between different people in different circumstances. The core of Camera Obs. consisted of citizenship activities and prevention of exclusion by the 'media society'. Thus the participants also developed their readiness to participate as actors in media culture. In this sense Camera Obs. ideologically joined the photo voice–family, using photography as a way of facilitating dialogue between the members and decision makers. This approach emphasises the uniqueness of individual stories and people's experiences of their living conditions. As such it is close to Paulo Freire's ideas and to critical pedagogy in general (see Byrne, 2014).

Camera Obs. was included in the development work of the Social Services of Helsinki City, where new kinds of client-centred projects were combined with the basic social work. The principles of these projects – the empowerment, communal and social participation and the interaction between various civic groups – illustrated the ideas of Camera Obs. and were also close to Paulo Freire's approach to community work (A-K. Koskinen, personal communication 20.8.2005; M. Siponen and T. Thomasén, personal communication 28.8.2005). According to these principles, Camera Obs. was open to everybody. I, the writer of this paper, joined the group because it provided an opportunity for applying Freirean pedagogy in practice. Here I refer to Camera Obs. as a community, although it may not fulfil the traditional criteria, not being constituted by locality, common history or common environment. It was an urban community, in which the criteria for communality are constituted more by the common fate: the similarity of circumstances, experiences and objectives (William, 2003). In the case of Camera Obs, the common fate was unemployment.

During its period of activity from 2004–2011, the group Camera Obs. organised various exhibitions and acted as an inspiring example for other groups of unemployed. In 2010, during the European Year Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, Camera Obs. was chosen for one in ten innovative projects in Finland (Mannonen, 2010). Later, when the Social Services gave up this kind of the empowerment-based rehabilitative social work in the area, the group ceased to function as a Social Services project. The material with the photos was destroyed and the group broke up.

In addition to its photographic role, Camera Obs. was both a development and a research project. It has produced useful tools for social work and education. In the area of the social work, these tools have been discussed in some journals and in seminars. In the area of pedagogy, the project has been presented in various conferences and in three articles (Camera Obscura group and Hannula, 2005; Hannula, 2008, 2009), all concentrating on the period of 2004–6, from the project's beginning to its first exhibition. The modus operandi of Camera Obs., and the advance of the dialogue from one's own community to a social dialogue with wider society, are described in a paper by Hannula (2008). In the present paper I stay in the same context, but dig deeper into the process by focusing on the pictorial voice creation and common reflective work (see for example Freire 1972). There are various reason why I have returned to the same context after ten years. Firstly, the pictorial working itself was not analysed in previous studies. However, in the current visual culture, the skills of reading pictures and creating pictorial meanings are even more important than a decade ago. Another reason is that I would like to make visible the wholeness of a collaborative project: how the participants together planned the actions, constructed dialogues, brought their own experiences to the pictorial working and entered into the citizenship discourse.

The research is conducted by the participatory action research approach. Paulo Freire's concepts of dialogue, active citizenship and emancipatory education were adapted as a theoretical base for both the action and the research. To bring Freire's quite theoretical conceptions closer to the escription of the practical group working, I have applied some issues of meaning-making by Mezirow (1998, 2000) and Vygotsky (1978).

Dialogue as a context and as an aim of meaning-making

When people practise citizenship skills in their communities, they become more able to have an influence on society (for example Dewey, 2004; Freire, 1972). According to Freire (1972), the task – in fact the vocation – of a human being is to participate in the creation of our common social, cultural and historical world. To Freire 'to be a subject' means above all to be a citizen (Hannula, 2000) and one, as Freire (1974, p. 13) observes, '…with a strong sense of social responsibility and of engagement in the task of transforming society'. Our welfare society may produce mechanisms that exclude some people from common decision-making processes, instead making them objects rather than subjects. In particular the lives of economically or socially disadvantaged people are referred to from afar. They can seldom tell the story of their own lives themselves, or influence the presentation of its circumstances.

The process in which people take their roles as subject citizens is called conscientisation. This is the process of finding the voice for silence: it requires that the people excluded from public discussion learn to express their own experiences of reality and enter into a dialogical relationship with the shared social world (Freire, 1970, 1972).

Combining Freire's, Mezirow's and Vygotsky's concepts, meaning-making forms part of the process of conscientisation. The common dialogue, for example in a learning group, provides a social space in which to explore different kinds of attitudes, values and purposes. This creates understanding not only for other people's living conditions, but also for one's own frames of reference. The mutual reflective process transforms the personal perspectives of meanings and might guide future action (Freire, 1972; Mezirow, 1998, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Unlike the more psychological views of Vygotsky and Mezirow, Freire's (e.g. 1972) concept of conscientisation includes societal action. It is evident that Freire takes also a political position in his writings (see for example Neumann, 2016; Roberts, 2016). In the broadest sense, Freire's pedagogy is political because it offers participants the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life and critical agency. Thus a project might challenge participants to engage critically with the world so that they could act on it (Giroux, 2017).

Reflection is the path to the conscious action, as highlighted by, for example, Dewey, Freire, Mezirow and Vygotsky. It presents an individual's ability to think at a high level, especially his or her ability to produce something new by creating connections between experiences, thoughts, ideas and meanings (Denton, 2011). In learning situations, however, integrating reflection to practice has been found problematic. Sometimes a connection between experience and meaning is totally absent (Denton, 2011; Ledwith, 2007; Purcell, 2006). Community-based projects in particular have been criticised for in most cases focusing on planning and action at the expense of reflection and exploring the circumstances; as a result the reflection stays just on a personal level. In both these cases the discussions about wider constructions of the inequalities are missing and the action may end up creating more societal adjustment than empowerment (Ledwith, 2007; Purcell, 2006).

Using Freire's words (for example 1970, 1972), the photos taken by members of Camera Obs. might serve as a pictorial language for reflective meaning-making. However, the photos are also tools; they provide a medium for widening dialogue outside the community. As a pictorial voice, the self-made images create multilevel interaction between a picture, the context in which it has been taken and the viewers. The family photos especially illustrate the active role of the subjects in the photo and their influence on the viewers (Ulkuniemi, 2005).

Barthes (1985) writes that photographs epitomising personal meanings may contain familiarity, awakening in the viewer mental images and memories; in so doing this initiates a dialogue between different circles of life. He writes about the two themes of a photograph, studium and punctum. 'Studium' refers to a field to which we are culturally connected – design, structure, the informative value of the picture, the explicit intention of the photographer. 'Punctum' is something that appears to challenge this intention or a detail that stands out in the picture. The photographer may put punctum on a picture with a purpose, but it often occurs by chance. Studium is always encoded; punctum is not. Punctum may be something apparently accidental to the informational value of the picture. In the photographs of ordinary people it is precisely this punctum – person-relatedness and non-intentional elements – that captures the viewer's attention. This guides her/his interpretation of the picture's content. The family photos give an

example, showing how our imagination creates new meanings about the photo. When we look at them we notice familiar but forgotten things, such as clothing, facial expressions and objects in the background.

Research process

Research settings

The purpose of this case study is to describe the process of meaning-making, when the participants of the photography group Camera Obs. constructed the pictorial voice from their own experiences and engaged in citizenship discourse. The research observes the character of the pictorial meaning-making in two contexts: firstly on the community level as an internal working and secondly on the social level outside the community. I describe the process through two different episodes. The first describes the meaning-making inside the group; the second describes the meaning-making that occurs when the participants create social dialogue in the context of the photo exhibition. The research questions are the following:

(1) What was the process of the pictorial meaning-making of Camera Obs. like, from the group dialogue to the public exhibition?
(2) How was the reflection combined to the meaning-making process?
(3) What kinds of citizenship skills did the participants of Camera Obs. develop during the photography work?

The majority of the participants of Camera Obs. were unemployed adults in the Helsinki area. Other participants were people with an interest in this kind of social photography and the social workers themselves, who were in charge of the project in the Social Services office. Participants joined the group by a snowballing method: existing participants recommended the action to their friends, or some social workers guided their clients to Camera Obs. The total number of participants varied from 20 to 30. Most were not actively interested in photography; many did not even possess a camera of their own. My role in the group was to be one of the participants, – with a residual understanding of Freirean pedagogy and its role in the project – and a voluntary researcher, for which I had got permission from the Social Services. In the first communal meeting the idea about the research being part of the activity was discussed with the participants. They accepted it, and gave me permission to use photos and observations in the research. Nevertheless, the photographer has the right to object to publication of her/his photos. During the period of the research, the group met once a month to view photos together on a screen, discuss them and to make plans for their use. As a part of the social work of Helsinki, the Social Services office provided the meeting place, the disposable cameras and the resources for preparing digitalised presentations.

The research was conducted with the participatory action research approach. As a dialogical method this kind of research changes the position of the researcher and the participants. They all are involved in the process, from the planning of working to the data gathering and analysis, as well as the interpretation of data and use of results (Swantz, 2004). Emancipatory action also seeks to develop critical self-understanding by observing the process and effects of one's own actions. This leads to perceiving critically also the larger cultural, social and historical processes that support everyday life (Kemmis, 2010). In this project, in addition to recoding meetings and gathering data and feedback after the exhibition, some members of Camera Obs. participated in international scientific conferences. Here they presented the project and organised digital photo exhibitions in Helsinki and Groningen (Camera Obscura, 2005; Hannula et al., 2006).

The field work of the research encompassed the period from the group's first meeting to its first exhibition – 18 months in total during 2004–6. The data of participative observations was gathered from across this period. Such data includes the research diary, on which I wrote notes after the meetings; the accounts and minutes of meetings; the video recordings of the communal viewings; sound clips from discussions in group working. Informal, oral feedback from the exhibition was collected by some participants.In this paper, I use the accounts to construct a chronological narrative to show the progress of the process. The material of the field work is also used as meta-information for the process. Two participants, Tuula and Annikki (not their real names), who actively participated in the project from its beginning,

have been interviewed. The semi-structured interview was conducted individually. Although both interviews focused on the same topics, the interviewees' responses brought out different kinds of experience. I classified the tape-recorded and transcribed interviews, applying the theory-bound, qualitative content analysis. In the description of the results I presented the interviewees' experiences into temporal episodes within an overarching chronological narrative that describes the progress of the project. In addition I use selected comments by individaul members and some media data in the episodes.

All the photos in this paper have been presented in the first exhibition of Camera Obs., which took place in 2006. Some of them have been published in other publications. The photographers own the copyright to these images. However, the main ethical question, in both the research and the project, is the publicity. In these pictures, the photographers open their private lives, including homes, family members and friends, to an audience they do not know. The participants were very conscious of that and, because the group sought to mount exhibitions in order to create social dialogue, publicity and its limits had been discussed as early as the first meeting, and often in subsequent ones. The collective decision was that a participant might give her/his photos voluntarily for communal use, which included exhibitions, development work of the Social Services office and research.

Analysis and the structure of the results

In describing the advance of the meaning-making, I apply a modified method of narrative change accounting originally presented by Rom Harré (see Harré and Secord, 1972) and developed further by Matti Laitinen (1999). In this paper I use their ideas about open and episodic description. The episodes are local and temporal periods of action: they are distinguished from one another by the quality of action, the sequential order between the actions and the participants' tendency of seeing intentional relationships between the successive episodes. In my previous paper (Hannula, 2008), I have used the same method. Here, however, I have concentrated on the working methods in the group and especially on the dialogical process. In order to describe the continuum of the dialogical working of Camera Obs., I constructed two macro episodes with micro episodes: the first episode describes the dialogue inside the group and the second describes the dialogue in another context, outside the community. For the research, these two episodes include different kinds of activity, material and interaction.

In this study, I apply the same two macro episodes, because they form the dialogical contexts for the meaning-making process. The first of these describes the meaning-making process inside the Camera Obs. community. This episode contains the photography, working in the large group to explore the sharing of the photos between participants with concomitant discussions, choosing the pictures for the exhibition and working in small groups. The second episode describes the external widening of the dialogue over the group boundaries towards the discourse of audience and media. This period covered by the second episode included preparation of the exhibition, interaction with the audience, handling publicity and evaluations of the project's consequences.

Results: The language of loneliness and isolation

The first episode: working in the group as a reflective practice

In the first meeting the group selected 'Everyday life' to be the common theme for photography and decided to aim for an exhibition. In the discussion, the principle behind the photography arose from the idea that we live in the same world, but do not all see it in the same way. Through photography we could create a shared understanding of the different conditions in which we lived. In the same meeting I presented the Freirean approach to the communal work. His ideas were close to those presented by other participants, and so the approach was accepted as a principle of teh group's work. The monthly meetings with the large group, in which the photos were viewed together on a screen, formed the basic communal activity.

The meaning-making developed by working with pictures: through taking photos, presenting, watching and interpreting them, and finally selecting images for the exhibition. Almost 800 photos were taken and looked at together in the group, most of them many times. In this paper, I assume that

the meanings are constructed; we look at pictures through our personal, social and cultural lens (Rose, 2001; Seppänen, 2005). Rose identifies three sites on meanings within images: the story of the production of an image; the image itself; and how it is read by the audience. All these contain different kinds of stories, interrogations and interpretations. Thus the images, constructed by a photographer will be re-constructed in the dialogical situation of the audience (see Kondo and Sjöberg, 2012; Änggård, 2006).

A visual content analysis (for example Rose, 2001; Seppänen, 2005) of the pictures quickly highlighted the most common themes: home life, shopping, children, food and cooking, friendship, favourite places, city life and public transport, relaxation. Nevertheless the content derives its character from different contexts. For instance images of food could relate to a common feast, a lunch eaten on a bench in a park, or a sandwich consumed in a hall of residence. The food may have been purchased from a market stall or taken from a congregational food line (See figs 1–3). In the group, a photographer's personal comments tell the individual meanings of a theme and the discussion shows shared experiences of this community.

Although an interactive group is the social space for producing the shared meanings, taking an individual photo has already provided a reflective situation. Through the camera lens, the photographer

Figure 1 Food line.

Figure 2 Milk and sandwich in a hall of residence.

Figure 3 Lunch.

begins to observe his/her surroundings more precisely, becoming more aware of his or her identity as image-maker, as well as of the situation in which he or she lives. Two interviewees, Tuula and Annikki (not their real names), both told how taking photographs and looking at their own images in a different context of communal display became eventually more systematic and interesting in a new way because of new challenges.

> Usually I try to get the picture as I see it, but they are never like that. Behind the camera it does not look like when you see the picture. It is actually interesting that the picture always changes somehow when it gets ready. (Annikki)

Taking a picture can enable the photographer to perceive matters that are part of everyday life in a new way, even if the subjects are repetitive in nature.

> I photographed the TV and there was my pal, the one without which I don't get along, in this way. It was one of those days when I thought that this is rather boring; I thought that always the TV – but I would get mad if I didn't have it. At least when one is rather poor it is the only fun. (Tuula)

The women's self-reflection and awareness of their own lifestyles continued when the digitalised photos were viewed together. Annikki looked at her photos of shopping and observed:

> …that has made me think and to notice that yes, I do look at the orange price tags and special offers. It makes one wonder whether it really is true that I just go to see if I get food for a slightly lower price. (Annikki)

The interviewees also found it interesting to look at other participants' photos. The pictures presented familiar things, but provided a new kind of understanding as well. Other people's living conditions, despite their familiarity, portrayed the rich tapestry of everyday life.

It was terribly interesting to look at them. It was just like that when most of the pictures came from the unemployed, they did not deviate so much, to be poor and like that…[They offered]… new understanding in a way. With those family pictures it is possible to peep at other people's home life. In the end everyday life is different, although we know each other. And even if one did not know everybody, one did see into their lives. (Tuula)

A photographer takes the photo with his/her own intentions. The conversation in the group with other participants, however, also brings out the difference of experiences. Because of the season, various pictures of Christmas were taken. Often it is presented as a family celebration, and that can direct the interpretation of the image's content. Tuula's picture of her Christmas provoked discussion.

I had a rather good insight except for some pictures when X said that there we have solitude. Actually I kind of intended that it is the Christmas of a single person, that was about my friend. There is no family celebration if there is no family. When we discussed it the others understood that I meant that this is being together with friends during Christmas and none of them goes to his family. One sees in one way and another in another way. Although it was only about my Christmas. Someone thinks that it is loneliness, it didn't mean exactly that. (Tuula)

Tuula did not accept the interpretation of her Christmas, but defended her right to spend the holiday in her own way, although this was different to popularised media images. A photographer has her/his own background and intentions, and shows the world through her/his eyes. The photo contains theories based on an image-maker's understanding about what s/he is looking at. Although an image may contain specific aims, interaction with an audience might change the interpretation (Riessman, 2008). Another photo about Christmas, which got the title 'A single mother's Christmas' in the group discussions (Figure 4), illustrates this point.

As an event that occurs on several levels, Christmas is an example of mixed experiences and bears many meanings. Traditionally in Finland a man in the family would fetch the Christmas tree from the forest. Nowadays, although the tree is usually bought from the marketplace, bringing it home is still viewed as the father's task. Referring to Barthes (1985) concept of punctum, an accidental element in a picture, in Figure 4 the saw in the woman's hand might be the punctum, which guides the interpretation.

In the discussions of the informal small groups reflective situations also arose. I participated in a small informal group of seven people, where the photographers presented their own images to others and explained the stories behind them. These opened individual and even deeply personal accounts. Every

Figure 4 A single mother's Christmas.

presenter gave also a name for his/her personal series of photos. These included 'Play and money', 'As a convalescent', 'Christmas', 'Nice girl', 'Doings, doings', 'Wandering in Helsinki', 'Family visit' and so on. The themes of the pictures varied, while their atmosphere also offered emotional tones to the interpretation. According to the subsequent comments of the participants, this kind of working in smaller groups gave insights into how other people lived and inspired mutual empathy.

Harper (2002) writes that the pictures reach something in the human consciousness that verbal questions do not. The photos can produce a dialectical process between human memory and the picture's content. Because individual people see pictures differently, viewing them may lead to a dialogical discussion about their meaning. One participant described the process of choosing pictures for the exhibition in this way:

> …a discussion really began when it was time to choose pictures for the Camera Obs. exhibitions: only a limited number of pictures could fit in. People had to defend the pictures they liked and explain to the others why they liked a certain picture, and most importantly, what they saw in it. In this process they came into contact with different points of view, observations, lifestyles, ideals and values. People could even find out new things about their own things about their own environment.

According to the researcher's accounts of the observations, the first episode, during which the participants worked inside the group, formed a collaborative space. Here the participants shared information, interpreted what they saw and debated the pictures' contents. Emotional expressions were accepted and the interest that the pictures aroused in others was obvious. During the first episode the participants did not attempt to reach any shared message for the exhibition. They rather attempted to find a good and versatile image of people's ordinary lives.

The second episode: the exhibition as a pictorial voice

As pointed out above, the exhibition was a central aim from the very beginning. A member of the group noted: 'First I thought that everybody wanted to take photos, then I realised that some of us like to be in a picture, and some like to watch them and discuss them.' Finally the exhibition showed that many participants enjoyed organising the event: preparing and distributing information, producing flyers, painting racks or preparing snacks for the exhibition opening. Later the publicity brought new challenges. Because the exhibition of 198 pictures was held in a hall in Helsinki's central railway station, thousands of people saw it and took time to look closely at the images.

For the participants the exhibition was the absolute summit of the project. Tuula and Annikki described their strong feelings about the event.

> Stupefying gorgeous, it was nice to do. … But the opening itself was a day full of suspense; I was terribly tense although there was no reason to feel stressed. I also acted as a guide. Many acquaintances said that they had seen some of the pictures in the newspaper. (Tuula)

> It was the peak. Everything came with such a rapid pace, the exhibition… First we spoke and spoke about it and then suddenly it happened. I was really happy that our exhibition was there, I was proud of it.' (Annikki)

These two interviewees spent time in the exhibition, as did some other members, and saw how people stopped to look at the photos. They also enjoyed listening to comments from the spectators. Based on conversations among and with the spectators, they concluded that the closeness of the photos to ordinary people's lives and the emotional spirit that they showed caught the spectators' interest.

> Somehow it came down to the fact that this is what people's everyday lives are actually like. I heard When the spectators talked with each other I heard them saying 'See, that's just like us…' (Tuula)

> This is everyday life. And there were fine pictures, for instance about Christmas, showing how different it can be when some are among their families and some single with meat and pasta casserole,

and that everyday life is rather distressing when it's just walking around, just being without anything to do. ... It shows that everyday life can be really boring… (Annikki)

There have always been those family themes, and this was not by any well-known photographer, a professional, but ordinary people photographing their own everyday lives... (Tuula)

The interviewees also considered the photos' overall message. Both of them concluded that the exhibition as a whole was a story of loneliness – something that clearly touched the spectators.

And someone came and said that loneliness shines through these pictures. (Tuula)

There were so many of those lone pictures, showing that there are many lonely people who have decided to make public that this is what it is like. I guess that many found themselves sitting disheartened on a table… (Annikki)

The exhibition got publicity in the national media. Finland's main newspaper gave a half-page presentation with the title 'This is everyday life for a citizen of Helsinki' (Figure 5). A commercial news channel mentioned the exhibition and some participants were interviewed on the radio. The publicity was upsetting and confusing, as Annikki explained: 'And then the media, they were in the news and then acquaintances called… All at once we got all this publicity. I was confused by it.'

This media publicity produced feedback in the form of text messages after one of the participants, Ahti (not his real name), was interviewed on television. He collected feedback about the exhibition, giving out his mobile phone number for people to send texts. The messages he received reflected many people's experience of exclusion and their sense of being misunderstood in political discourse. Some people from lower economic backgrounds found that the images portrayed truths about their own lives. They appreciated the presentation of such difficult situations, well known to them but absent from mainstream discussions.

Ahti, we can't even afford to take a sauna, so tight are we for money.

If only someone could show respect for those of us who are disadvantaged

Hello Ahti! There really are many of us disadvantaged!

Figure 5 A newspaper article describing the exhibition in the national daily.

The photos also received attention on the internet. The blog of Ethnologist's Desktop (Kansatieteilijän desktop) advertised it as: 'In Helsinki railway station, periodically, there are interesting photography exhibitions. Now (30.1.–5.2) the 'Everyday' is made visible there. Worth a quick look at least – or especially – in passing.'

A response posted on the internet read: 'Interesting exhibition indeed. To me it is somehow hugely inspiring to see other people's domestic lives. Even in the documentaries, I always try to peep behind the interviewees to see what the homes are like.'

The reaction of the exhibition's audience gave the members of Camera Obs. a feeling of having done meaningful work. After the exhibition both interviewees reported a new sense of richness in their own lives. They found that the project had brought changes to their ordinary ways of living, and altered their perceptions of their own lives. In particular they had developed the courage to tackle new things and a new enthusiasm for joining in other activities. They expressed such feelings in comments such as:

> It (taking photos) gives meaning and purpose for walking… going around with a camera gives purpose. … It gives a structure to my life, which is pretty disconnected now that I'm not employed… (Annikki)

> This has been a really creative task; it has been an incredibly good experience even for me, real experience. I would like to do something similar again . … I have gained the courage to try other hobbies too… it gives that kind of daring. (Tuula)

Because Annikki and Tuula found that the exhibition had influenced its audience, the participation inspired confidence and willingness to continue such civic activity.

> One can make a difference. We have already had an influence; I believe that influence is possible, for instance through an exhibition or by making a book or something. There are all kinds of possibilities … I feel that this must be continued. (Annikki)

> Camera Obs. could look at other subjects; if something is wrong, one can make an exhibition, express one's opinion. (Tuula)

Such self-confidence and feelings of empowerment also increased on a communal level. In the meeting after the exhibition some members of the group expressed a belief that through the pictures they had created something that was worth continuing. The group began to plan the next exhibition with a new theme (this was 'the love') and started co-operation with other associations.

In the process of the meaning-making, the first dialogue was the context, in which the members became conscious of different kinds of phenomena in their everyday lives and found shared experiences. Nevertheless, the negotiations of the pictorial meaning-making continued in the second dialogue, through interaction with the audience. The comment 'loneliness shines through these pictures', made by a spectator, had often been repeated by the group's members. Only following interaction with the audience outside the community, however, did 'the Language of Loneliness and Isolation' become established as a conscious, powerful message of the first exhibition.

Conclusion

The exhibition at Helsinki railway station, and the discussion which followed it, showed that Camera Obs. succeeded in adapting its photographic language to convey messages that reached other people. The photos guided spectators to homes, festive occasions, shopping, moments shared with friends and children, occasions in public transport and outdoor exercises. This vision of 'Everyday' was often different from that presented in the public media: it included challenges, dreariness and monotony, but also the genuine joy and richness of experiences. Although many pictures were intertwined with domestic life, the everyday events were not seen from the point of view of a nuclear family. Instead, the focus was upon the lifestyles of single people without families. Within the pictures another message arose: the

experience of living as an outsider. The emotional tone underlying the photographs was also perceived by the audience. Saari (2016) analyses that loneliness is a societal phenomenon in Finland. National well-being has focused on raising the economic standard of living, but in the process social relations have been forgotten. In this context the action of Camera Obs. is political: it attempts to engage excluded people critically with the world so that they could act on it (see Giroux, 2017).

The results of the research are in agreement with Freire (for example 1972) and Mezirow (for example 1998) in believing the crucial reflective space for the meaning-making to be the dialogue in a collaborative group. However, during the first episode, which described the dialogical working in the group, the pictorial voice was only intuitively present. This voice became conscious and gained strength through its reciprocity with the audience. Accordingly, as Freire highlights, interaction with the external community is important for the practical commitment to the meanings.

Both the participatory action research–methodology, with its cyclic form, and Freire's process of the conscientisation have a separate place for reflection, approaches which are applied in many learning and community-based projects. However, the joining of reflection with the action has been found to be problematic (Denton, 2011; Ledwith, 2007; Purcell, 2006). This research suggests that the reflection is not a separate part during the learning project, but rather takes place on every level – starting from the individual observation, then continuing in the group, as well as in the interaction with the outside community.

This case study showed that taking photographs and viewing them together was a step towards participation in civic activity; it offered opportunities for both individual and social transformation. The action gave self-confidence and courage to the participants, enthusing them to take up new challenges, and the group Camera Obs. continued the civic activity with further projects.

Declarations and conflict of interests

This project was approved by the Social Services of Helsinki City. All participants provided informed consent and declaration forms are freely made available to the Editors upon request.

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