

Children as photographers

From Lewis Hines's campaign photography on child labour in the early 1900s to Dorothea Lange's portraits of the Great Depression, Steve McCurry's portrait of 12-year old Sharbat Gula, the 'Afghan Girl', in the mid-1980s, and Sally Mann's controversial 'Immediate Family', children have been the subject of much public photographic practice. Child and family portraiture is also a recognised genre of photography which emerged with urbanisation, industrialisation and the rise of the middle classes. School photographs are a further familiar mode of documenting childhood, and children's images are used the world over to sell products and raise money for charitable causes.

It is fair to assume that, historically and internationally, children themselves have also been producing a very considerable body of photographic images, through practices of family photography at home and on holiday, as well as taking photographs of their friends and leisure pursuits. Such practices are ever more prolific with the advent of digital photography and the inclusion of photography in mobile devices that children have ready access to.

Yet, despite the emphasis in childhood studies on children and youth as producers of culture, we know surprisingly little about children as photographers themselves, and there are few known examples of children's photography in the history of photography. Those stories that come to light only surface in cases where the young photographer becomes a famous professional, adult photographer.

A notable such example is Jean Henri Lartigue (1894 - 1986), who started taking photographs when he was seven years old, producing an impressive archive of his family members, and of automobiles which fascinated him as a child. Lartigue would use a stool to reach his camera, which was poised over a tripod higher than himself. Similarly, after he became a renowned director, the pictures that the young Stanley Kubrick took as a high school student are today in circulation.

This curious omission of the child photographer is perhaps unsurprising - a similar fate befell women photographers and photographers of colour, as well as amateur photographers more generally, who until recently were largely written out of photography's largely white and male history.

Recent research makes it harder to sustain such an exclusion from the narrative of photography. For example, Mike Sharples and colleagues show how children are reflectively aware of both the photographic act and its impact, as well as the different properties of the photographic image from the subject of its representation. They argued that children who produce photographic pictures are not adult photographers in apprenticeship. Instead, they exhibit different intentions in their image composition and can be critical of adults' idealized and posed images. Children in Sharples and colleagues' study valued authenticity and informality over technical proficiency.

In the absence of more historical documentation of the child photographer, we might instead consider the contexts in which it becomes possible for children to take on the role of photographer(s). In this vein, children as photographers readily come into being through artistic, educational, development, and research projects, domains which often overlap.

Photography projects with children in schools, youth centres and other leisure spaces are increasingly common. Many go undocumented beyond their life span, but most have common features of creativity, self-discovery and self-expression, and skill development, as well as the exploration of themes of identity, belonging, history and community. Wendy Ewald *Portraits and Dreams* is an example of a longstanding photographic engagement with Appalachian children in the United States, who photograph their lives and communities. The academy award winning documentary film '*Born into Brothels*' by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, documents an art intervention project in Kolkata, in which children of prostitutes made pictures of their everyday life and presented thus an overlooked perspective of life there.

Another context in which children are publicly recognised as photographers is through competitions occasionally run by charities, newspapers and educational institutions. The Young *RSPCA* in the United Kingdom runs an annual photography competition for young people 18 and under. In 2017 *The Telegraph*, a U.K. broadsheet, ran *The Little Picture Competition* inviting children under 8 years of age and those between 9 and 18 to submit photographs of their family holidays. Also in 2017 the City of Sydney in Australia ran a children's photography competition for 3 to 11 year olds, *Little Sydney Lives*.

Children's photography has been widely used as a tool in research with children, as well as in social work and community settings, particularly through techniques such as the photovoice or the photo diary, in which children are given cameras in order to produce images of their lives, communities and environments. The technique of photovoice is today widely used by community workers and action researchers as a participatory photographic practice with the aim of empowering children. The technique originates in the work of Caroline Wang and colleagues, who have sought ways through which to access more insightful data about the health conditions of women in rural China.

In social science and childhood research, children's own photography has been often used as a research tool through which to access children's own views of their worlds and experiences. Photography, along other visual and creative methods, is positioned as a technique which may help overcome language skills, abilities, age restrictions as well as balance power relations between children and researchers and/or practitioners. However, there are different perspectives on these issues. A notable criticism is that the understanding of photography as providing a language that is somehow closer to children's communication strategies promotes an essentialist understanding of childhood.

Through the employment of children's photography in research, children's views and arguments have been made visible. Phil Mizen has explored working children's own perceptions of their labor and working environments and conditions. Similarly, Marjorie Faulstich Orleana has shown how pictures that her children interlocutors produced provided a

view of their urban environments that differed greatly from what state policy assumed. Melissa Nolas and colleagues ([The Connectors Study](#)) have used digital photography with children creating a project archive of over 5000 children's photographs of different aspects of their everyday lives in three cities (Athens, London, Hyderabad); this has resulted in the online [Children's Photography Archive](#), the first open archive of children's photography of their everyday life.

Photography is a key way in which children can relate to public life, and a key medium in the creation of childhood publics. A less instrumental approach to understanding the child photographer as she uses the camera to navigate her world and surroundings is waiting to be explored.

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See also Children and Art, Children as Visual Artists; Family Photography; Childhood publics; Photovoice; Photo-elicitation; visual methods

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