Exploring the Identities and Experiences of Rural First-Generation Indigenous Students Using Photo-Cued Interviewing

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Abstract

This case study illustrates the use of photo-cued interviewing to improve postsecondary education for students from rural Indigenous communities in Peru. We explored (a) how access to postsecondary education influenced the identity development of rural first-generation Indigenous students in Peru, and (b) how postsecondary education can be improved to support their identities, needs, and goals. A total of 31 participants took photos that represented their response to “Who am I?” and how postsecondary education strengthened, threatened, or otherwise changed their identities. We then talked with the participants about what the photos represented about their identities and experiences. At the conclusion of the interviews, we invited participants to offer recommendations for improving postsecondary education to support students like themselves. Finally, in collaboration with the participants and local government authorities, we hosted a photo exhibition that depicted participants’ experiences and invited policymakers and the public to consider how to better support rural first-generation Indigenous students. We reflect on our study—both our methods and the execution of our study overall—to offer practical lessons useful for educational researchers who plan to conduct similar action-oriented, student voice, and visual participatory work with Indigenous and other marginalized community members.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Use photos to elicit data in qualitative research
- Anticipate and overcome challenges associated with international, cross-cultural research
- Apply ethical principles of research when engaging with marginalized communities
- Strategize ways to make research impactful for participants and local communities

Project Overview and Context

Between 2018 and 2020 our research team engaged in an action-oriented, qualitative research project in collaboration with Indigenous youth in Peru. Research has recognized that there are many challenges facing Indigenous students in postsecondary education in Peru, but the specific challenges and their impacts on students are still poorly understood (Ames, 2019; Sumida Huaman, 2013; Levitan & Post, 2017). Having long-standing relationships with Indigenous community members in the Peruvian Andes allowed us to undertake the project, which aimed to (a) understand the identities and experiences of first-generation Indigenous postsecondary students from rural communities in Peru and (b) develop supports for their well-being and success. Our project was exploratory and was purposefully oriented to have impact beyond scholarship, engaging directly with communities and authorities and fostering practical change in alignment with ethical practices of research with Indigenous participants. Our research team consists of two early career scholars originally from the United States and one novice graduate research assistant from Peru. None of the
Researchers identify as Indigenous.

Study participants were 31 postsecondary students who come from rural communities in the Andes Mountains or Amazonian Jungle and speak an Indigenous language (Quechua or Asháninka) at home. Each student was the first in their family to attain education beyond secondary school (i.e., “first-generation”) and attends or recently completed their studies at a variety of postsecondary institutions in the city of Cusco. Despite recent policy changes and initiatives to support Indigenous students in Peru, students like our participants still face a number of challenges accessing postsecondary education. For example, rural communities have historically lacked formal educational opportunities, which means students often do not qualify for postsecondary education (Ames, 2019). When they do qualify, they encounter a number of barriers to access, which include distance (most institutions are located in urban areas), cost (including tuition, housing, transportation, etc.), social capital (fewer networks with formally educated individuals), competing needs or interests (subsistence farming, caring for family members, etc.), and less financial support from the Peruvian government for rural schools as compared with urban schools (Ames, 2002; Cortina, 2013; Cueto et al., 2011; Sumida Huaman, 2013; Levitan & Post, 2017). When individuals from these rural communities are able to access formal schooling, the education that they receive is often Western-centric and/or anti-Indigenous (Gálvez & Gavilán, 2016). In addition, the intersection of students’ rural, Indigenous, and first-generation identities poses unique challenges that most institutions of postsecondary education are poorly equipped to address. So, exploring access to and persistence through postsecondary education as it relates to rural Indigenous first-generation student identity was particularly important in this context.

To better understand the impact that these challenges have on students, and to construct ways to overcome them, our study responds to the following research questions:

1. **Research Question 1**: How does postsecondary education impact the identity development, well-being, and success of first-generation students from rural Indigenous communities?
2. **Research Question 2**: How can postsecondary education be improved to support positive identity development, well-being, and success for rural Indigenous youth?

This study offers a number of novel contributions to scholarship and policy discussions, including its exploration of the experiences of rural first-generation Indigenous youth in postsecondary education in Peru from their perspectives, as well as its use of photo-cued interviewing (PCI) to do so. Beyond access and completion rates (see, for example, Ames, 2019; Guerrero & Rojas, 2019; Guerrero et al., 2019), very little research has examined the experiences of these students in postsecondary education. As the vast majority of existing research on the impacts of postsecondary education for rural Indigenous youth is statistical, researchers and policy makers currently do not have significant insight into how postsecondary education impacts students at a personal level. Therefore, this case study addresses a topical and methodological gap in existing research, provides guidance for undertaking similar research with Indigenous and other marginalized groups, and identifies avenues for future inquiry.
Section Summary

- This study uses visual participatory and collaborative approaches to engage in research with Indigenous students in Peru.
- This study’s exploration of Indigenous student identity as it relates to their experiences in postsecondary education is novel in its contribution to scholarship and in its methodological approach.

Research Design

Given the nature of our research questions (above) and the dearth of scholarship in this area, we used a research design that was qualitative—which allows for open explorations of as-of-yet unknown phenomenon (as opposed to testing a hypothesis or looking for specific trends, which is common in quantitative research)—and action-oriented (Snow et al., 2016; Sumida Huaman, 2020). To perform our study, we used an exploratory, picture-based method called PCI.

PCI (Johnson, 2017, 2020) is a novel photo-elicitation-type method that allowed us to visually, vocally, and dialogically explore how participants’ experiences impacted their identities. Each student was loaned a camera or used their own smartphone to take photos that represented various aspects of their identity. We asked them to respond to the prompt “Who am I,” considering specifically who they were before entering postsecondary education, during their studies, and (if applicable) since completing their degrees or departing the institution.

While the prompt “who am I” seems simple and straightforward, developing the right prompt for the PCI method requires thoughtful planning. Our prompt needed to be broad, because we wanted the participants to drive their own narratives without being too restricted, but we also needed it to be clear so we could elicit data that addressed our research questions. We chose the “Who am I?” prompt because we felt it would help us achieve both of these objectives.

Participants were given 2 to 3 weeks to take photos. We then asked them to select five to 10 of their photos and share them with the research team via WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, which are the most commonly used messaging platforms in Andean Peru. Their selected photos served as prompts for individual semi-structured interviews meant to interrogate if/how their identities had changed and what, specifically, about postsecondary education had influenced their identity development.

PCI was purposefully designed to allow participants to drive the interview conversation, while also providing space for real-time interpretation by the interviewer (Johnson, 2020). This constructionist interviewing approach (Holstein, 2018) affords an opportunity to co-create knowledge during the interview, using the participants’ experiences and the researchers’ expertise to come to an understanding about a particular topic (something that typically happens outside of the interview during the analysis phase). In this sense, PCI would maximize the time we had with our participants, which was not much given their demanding schedules (more
Photo-elicitation-type methods like PCI also enable researchers to access otherwise inaccessible aspects of the participant’s life and experiences (Harper, 2002). Such methods have been found particularly useful when engaging in research with members of marginalized communities (see, for example, Mitchell et al., 2016; Wang & Burris, 1999). They also lend themselves well to disseminating research in eye-catching ways, potentially fostering broader public engagement, advocacy, and change (Wang & Burris, 1999). In addition to these strengths, PCI in particular helps to reveal both the process and product of a phenomenon—in our case, what types of experiences participants had (process) and what their impacts on participants’ identities, well-being, and success were (product; Johnson, 2017).

**Section Summary**

- PCI allows participants to drive the interview narrative and gives the researcher space to interpret during the interview.
- PCI affords opportunities for researchers to access participants’ experiences.
- PCI lends itself well to advocating for changes that benefit marginalized communities.

**Research Practicalities**

Our research was made possible by a CA$74,644 grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This allowed us to travel to and live in Peru for roughly 3 months and to support a postdoc and graduate research assistant.

**Research Team**

Joe was the primary investigator (PI) and Kayla was Co-PI and a postdoc. Natalia Incio Serra (MA, McGill University) was our graduate research assistant. All three researchers collaboratively contributed to each phase of the project, including writing the grant proposal, obtaining ethics clearance, research design, protocol development, participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

The tightly knit organization of our small research team enabled us to efficiently make research decisions while ensuring equitable team member input. It also allowed us to work very collaboratively, conducting interviews and performing analysis as a whole group. Our collaborative efforts were strengthened by the fact that we all embodied different identities. Joe is a White man of mixed ethnicity from urban Baltimore, Maryland, USA. Kayla is a White woman from rural Appalachia, USA, and was a low-income, first-generation college student. Natalia is a Peruvian woman from urban Lima, Peru. These differences, among others, fostered a richer research environment, including the pursuit of different lines of questioning during interviews, offering different insights based on diverse perspectives and experiences, and deep discussions around data interpretation.

We are all intimately familiar with education and Indigenous communities in the Cusco region, which was
critical to the success of this project. Joe and Kayla have worked in and led educational organizations in the Urubamba Valley in the Province of Cusco since 2009 and 2015, respectively. Through this work, they have educated secondary students from rural communities who have gone on to postsecondary education in Cusco. Natalia previously worked for the Ministry of Education, where she specialized in projects relating to community schools in the rural Andes and Amazon. In addition, our diverse scholarly expertise and interests enhanced the team’s ability to undertake the research project. For example, Kayla’s research interests include student development and curriculum design in postsecondary education, and she developed the PCI method. Joe’s research focuses on culturally grounded education for Indigenous and other marginalized communities. Natalia’s research focuses on issues of identity and well-being, particularly with marginalized communities.

**Logistics**

Given the complexities of our international and cross-cultural research context, a number of logistical practicalities are worth noting. For example, language: All research was conducted in Spanish, which was a second or third language for Joe, Kayla, and the participants, and a home language for Natalia. All individuals were fluent enough in Spanish for this to be acceptable, and participants were encouraged to use their home languages during interviews when necessary. These were later translated into Spanish. Travel was another factor, as participant recruitment and data collection occurred in Cusco. The research team lived in Cusco from mid-January to mid-April 2019. Because of our ongoing engagement in the region, housing was easy to secure, but is another important consideration when doing prolonged community-engaged research. Most of our participants were living in Cusco at the time of data collection, although some had to travel via bus to Cusco from their home communities to participate in the interviews. The availability and practicality of using technology is another consideration. Our methodology required the use of technology, which was both a help and hindrance at times (more on this later).

**Site Selection**

We selected urban Cusco as our research site for both practical and theoretical reasons. Because we wanted our study to have direct local impact, choosing a space where we already had contacts and cultural knowledge would allow us to more easily mobilize research findings and work toward change. Due to our previous and ongoing work in the region, we had already established personal and professional contacts and had cultivated expertise regarding issues in educational access for local, rural Indigenous communities there. Our connections and expertise enabled us to dive deeply into discussions with participants, which was not only a critical component of our method, but also saved our research team a lot of preparation time that might have otherwise been spent learning the context. It is very important for researchers to learn the context before engaging in a study with marginalized community members.

In addition, the city of Cusco is home to most of the region’s accredited postsecondary institutions, including trade schools and universities. If students from rural communities in the region wanted to attend postsecondary education, they often migrated to Cusco. Such rural-to-urban migration is common and often necessary for Indigenous students throughout the world who seek access to postsecondary education, which
supports the transferability of our findings.

Cusco also provided a contextually rich setting in which to explore issues of Indigeneity and education access, which added important theoretical nuance to our study. As the historical capital of the Incan empire, and due to its proximity to Machu Picchu, Cusco is a major tourism hub. Cusco visually boasts of pride for its Indigenous cultural heritage, yet it is also a site of coloniality and neoliberal capitalism. The people who live and work in Cusco (most of whom have Quechua heritage) often discriminate against the same individuals who most embody the Indigenous culture that they otherwise celebrate (in most cases, individuals from rural communities). So, conducting our study in a place like Cusco would make an important theoretical contribution to scholarship on the impacts of education on Indigenous identity.

Thinking about the historical and contextual factors that make a space unique while also ensuring that findings from your study can be transferable to new contexts makes for a good research project (Merriam, 1988). Cusco was a practical and purposeful choice for our research setting, one that would make unique contributions to the field and with transferability to other cities that serve as education hubs for rural Indigenous students.

**Participant Recruitment**

Our previous work in Cusco also aided our participant recruitment. We used snowball sampling, beginning with five former students and professional contacts from two local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that provide access to postsecondary school for rural Indigenous youth. For a study like ours—in which participants are asked to share personal information, where data on the characteristics you are looking for are lacking, and where you may not have a local partner institution to base your activities from—snowball sampling is often the most effective way to find participants. Snowball sampling is also helpful because people from historically marginalized populations may be hesitant to speak with strangers or might not want to participate without having some kind of connection to the researchers (such as a friend who can vouch for the researchers as being decent people). Snowball sampling is also a culturally appropriate way to recruit participants in the Peruvian Andes, where most communication occurs via word of mouth.

To initiate snowball sampling, we met with our former students and NGO contacts and asked them if they would like to participate, and/or if they knew of others who might be interested. Our criteria were that the participants (a) were the first in their family (or the first generation, if they had siblings who were college-educated) to enroll in postsecondary education, (b) came from rural communities, and (c) spoke an Indigenous language at home. Merriam (1988) writes that such *purposive sampling* should be used when researchers want to understand or gain insight into a specific population’s perspectives or experiences.

We recruited 34 participants, but due to scheduling issues and dropout before and during data collection, we interviewed 28. When determining the ideal number of participants, appropriate sample size depends on both paradigm and purpose (Boddy, 2016). Sandelowski (1995) and Boddy (2016) posit that too-large sample sizes can inhibit deep, meaningful, and timely engagement with qualitative findings, with Boddy suggesting
that 30 participants is a meaningful and manageable amount. Practically speaking, we wanted to uncover rich information with participants who shared certain characteristics about their subjective experiences, but we also wanted a participant pool that would be manageable for our very small team. We also considered that the overall population of rural Indigenous students in Cusco was fairly small. So, 28 participants was a good number.

As we were exploring an underexplored area of research, we purposefully kept our selection criteria broad to elicit a variety of narratives. While we did employ purposive sampling (bounded by our selection criteria), we did not purposefully recruit participants from particular communities or who had studied in particular institutions or majors. We did not want to arbitrarily recruit people from a certain category, which might have excluded important narratives. Rather, we wanted to explore the variety of experiences and choices made by participants from these similar-yet-varying backgrounds. Although participants shared the characteristics of being first-generation Indigenous students from rural communities, the diversity afforded by our broad selection criteria allowed us to explore how students from and in various contexts were impacted by postsecondary education. Due to the smallness of our overall sample, we do not claim to make definitive conclusions based on any particular identity, but instead think about patterns between and among the participants.

For both ethical reasons and to incentivize participation, we offered 60 Peruvian Soles (approx. CA$25) to participants at the conclusion of the interview. We also provided compensation for participants’ transportation to the interview site and snacks upon their arrival. We purposefully selected these incentives to meet practical needs of our participant population and to align with local customs.

**Ethical Clearance**

Conducting research ethically with Indigenous populations is essential, and complex. Tensions can exist between what institutional review boards (IRBs) consider ethical and what community members consider ethical, so understanding both is important. Researchers must first understand what the community considers to be ethical research prior to designing and implementing a research study. As our team had over two decades of experience working in this context, and had previously written about ethical engagement with Indigenous community members (Levitan, 2019), we were equipped to design our study to be aligned with local Indigenous ethical practices. This included ensuring that our work would directly impact our participants’ lives and communities (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Smith, 2013; Sumida Huaman, 2020).

Obtaining ethical clearance for our study at the institutional level was surprisingly uncomplicated, though IRB approval is a drawn-out process, and some institutions, like ours, have additional protections for Indigenous populations. Because participants would be taking photos, we had to draft protocols and a consent script to inform participants about ethical photo-taking practices (such as obtaining permission of subjects, not taking pictures of minors without parental permission). We also had to take extra precautions regarding confidentiality and ensuring that participants were well-informed about their rights around withdrawing from the study and how the data would be used.
Section Summary

• A collaborative, experienced, and diverse research team adds richness to the research process.
• Site selection should be determined by its practicality, its appropriateness for the study, and its transferability to other contexts.
• Participant recruitment strategies should be tailored to meet the needs of the study as well as participants.
• Logistics such as language use, travel, and technology can pose unique challenges.
• Researchers must learn what ethical research means to both community members and to IRBs.

Methods in Action

In this section, we describe three separate phases of our research: eliciting photos, conducting interviews, and analysis and dissemination.

Eliciting Photos

After recruiting our participants, we met with each of them in person to explain the project and to share the research prompt with them: “Who am I?” We found that participants were really curious about what we were looking for, often asking for clarification or reassurance. For example, many asked, “Is [x] what you want?” Participants generally seemed interested in the self-exploration that the method and prompt afforded, but our prompt was too open-ended for a few participants. To address these issues, we developed examples that allowed us to demonstrate what we expected. We used examples from our own lives—for example, a photo of a soccer ball to represent Joe’s identity as a former intercollegiate soccer player—to build a positive relational dynamic but not influence their choices too much.

Our photo-taking timeline of 2 to 3 weeks seemed sufficient, as only one participant asked for more time (which we gave them). Evidenced by the photos that participants shared, this time frame gave participants the opportunity to visit their most frequented locations, like their institution, their home community, their workplace, and so on. Photos from these different places often represented how participants’ identities had changed since enrolling in school, which might have been omitted if they had been given less time to take photos. We also found that too much time between recruiting participants and interviewing them can lead to forgetting the research prompt, a loss of interest, and/or lost cameras.

Conducting Interviews

We interviewed participants in the sitting room of our rented apartment, which was centrally located near the main plaza in Cusco and had fast, reliable Wi-Fi, and a large flat screen TV for displaying participants’ photos. It was a private space, which we felt was important to provide when showing and sharing the photos and talking about the participants’ (sometimes sensitive) experiences. We called it our “office.”

The participants brought their photos in many formats. Some had taken them with their phone, some brought
old pictures, some took pictures of old pictures, and some had downloaded images from the internet. Some had them saved to their phones and sent them to us via WhatsApp, and others had digital cameras, so we saved them to our computer via an SD card. Most often, photos were shared with us digitally and we were able to display them on the TV so that everyone in the room could see them. However, some participants brought physical copies of photos. We had not anticipated that participants’ photos might not be digital, which created a few complications, such as what to do with hard-copy photos. (We decided to take our own pictures of them so participants could keep the originals.)

Most participants followed the guidelines and had preselected eight to 10 photos (no participant had selected only five), but some brought 20+ photos with them, which we asked them to narrow down to 10, which took extra time. Then, we began the interview, using a semi-structured protocol with flexibility for the conversation to move to different topics. We first asked them to describe a photo that represented something about who they were before they entered university and talk about that. We would then ask them if they had other pictures to talk about before school, then moved to during school, then to (if applicable) postschool. Here is an example:

- **Natalia:** We want to talk a little bit about your life before post-secondary school. Are any of these photos from before you got to Cusco?
- **Katarina:** This one (see Figure 1). That is the first time I met [the NGO leaders] […] I did not think I would have the opportunity to study because I did not have the financial means. That day, I met and made known to them what I wanted to study, what was my goal, and they gave me the opportunity to enter the [NGO] and be able to study my career.
- **Natalia:** What does that photo represent to you? Does it say something about you?
- **Katarina:** Yes. For me it represents … that day I put to the test how I was going to present myself to everyone. For me, they were unknown people. It was like entering a place that I did not know and I put to the test my perseverance.

Figure 1. Leaders and students of the NGO that facilitated access to education for Katarina.
Participants had a wide variety of experiences and ways of thinking about their identities, so there was a lot of diversity in these conversations, even if many photos looked very similar. For example, Tatia used a photo of herself in traditional dress to represent how postsecondary education made her feel disconnected from her home community (Figure 2), whereas Carmen used a similar photo to represent how her education had empowered her to be proudly Quechua (Figure 3):

- **Natalia:** When you were in Cusco, did you miss any of your community’s customs?
- **Tatia:** Yes. *Shows photo*. I miss the festivals, like here, and the food. And speaking Quechua.
- **Natalia:** At [the institute], no Quechua?
- **Tatia:** No. There were Quechua courses, but only for [a degree in Quechua language].
- **Natalia:** And your companions did not speak Quechua?
- **Tatia:** In [my institute] there are quite a few Quechua-speaking people, but they did not speak it. Many people were ashamed. And people who have physical traits—it is easy to recognize, even in the way you speak you can recognize a person who speaks Quechua. That is very bad for me. They discriminate against you.

*Figure 2. Tatia’s sister and brother in traditional dress.*
• **Carmen**: I love that people see me [in my traditional clothes].
• **Natalia**: What are you doing in this photo?
• **Carmen**: I went to a school to talk about education. I told them that education is important and that is why we must try hard.
• **Joe**: Are you wearing clothes from your community?
• **Carmen**: Yes.
• **Joe**: Do you like wearing your traditional clothes in Cusco?
• **Carmen**: Yes. Why not, it’s my culture. I identify with it a lot because it is my roots, where I come from. My dad always told me, “Don’t forget your roots. If you have a good base you are going to face things more easily.” So, I always say that “I’m from there and I speak Quechua.” A lot of people tell me … my teacher for example, my professor at the university speaks Quechua. I have a Quechua teacher!

**Figure 3. Carmen in her traditional dress speaking to a classroom of students.**
While Katarina and Carmen’s narratives related closely to the photos they were discussing, our conversations with participants were not always directly tied to participants’ photos. We found that, after sharing a photo, the participants often steered the conversation away from what was depicted in the photo to other related topics. This was not only welcomed, but the point of the method. Because participants’ photos are not considered data with PCI (only as tools to elicit data), the fact that participants would use the photos to first ground the conversation before spinning off and branching out to other topics is encouraging. It meant that the method was working as we had planned. Keeping the conversation focused on the research objectives is the interviewer’s job, and we found this to be fairly easy in our interviews with these participants. Here are some examples of how we re-directed conversations back to our objectives:

- “You have talked a lot about the food in your community. Is this something that you miss here in Cusco?”
- “You talk a lot about your friends back home. Are your friendships in the university any different?”
- “It sounds like you spent a lot of time farming in your community. Is this similar to or different from how you spend your time now?”
Analysis and Dissemination

Once data were collected, we returned to our home institutions to perform data analysis and plan for the dissemination of our findings. We employed a Peruvian colleague to transcribe the data, keeping the text in Spanish for analysis. Data were only translated into English during the writing phase.

We generated themes through an emergent (Saldaña, 2015) coding scheme, focusing on salient aspects of identity (Levitan et al., 2018) and how to improve postsecondary education to support those identities. We also identified representative quotes and photos to create a public photo exhibit. We returned to Cusco about a year later to plan and execute the photo exhibit in collaboration with our participants and local policymakers. We contacted the municipal government to inquire about using their exhibition space, which entailed persistent (often exhausting) coordination with government officials. We eventually partnered with the Department of Culture, Sport and Education, who offered us an exhibit space free of charge.

We wanted our participants to take part in the event, but because it was held during summer vacation (Peru’s summer break is from December to March), many of them were working in their home communities. Some had changed their phone numbers. For those we were able to contact and who were in Cusco (about 50%), we invited them to see/approve the quotes and photos we had selected, and to reflect on the project.

Our free public photo exhibition took place in the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Municipality of Cusco in March 2020. Participants’ photos and quotes (blinded) were thematically arranged and displayed along a wall. A section at the end listed their recommendations for improving postsecondary education, and we included an interactive space that invited attendees to leave their own recommendations (Figures 4–7). Three participants spoke at the inauguration event, sharing their stories with the public.

Figure 4. The public photo exhibit.
Figure 5. One section of the photo exhibit (“Community and Traditions”).
Figure 6. One photo and quote from the photo exhibit ("I feel proud to be from the countryside and I can never say that I am not.")
Figure 7. Exhibit attendee writing her recommendation for improving education.
We encountered troubling power dynamics during this phase of the project, particularly as many participants’ narratives included criticisms of the government and its lack of support for Indigenous students from rural communities. We had to carefully navigate the bureaucracy to ensure that there was not going to be any kind of stifling of the participants’ voices (which there was not, although some of the museum workers expressed displeasure with the exhibit). Despite promises made, only one government official attended the exhibit inauguration. Disappointingly, after only 1 week on display, the exhibit was disrupted by COVID-19. Because our research team had to evacuate from Peru, the exhibit was, reportedly, taken down and stored in an unknown location. When we are next able, we plan to return to Peru, reengage with the local government, and create a plan for moving forward with the project.

Section Summary

- Eliciting useful photos required us to provide sufficient photo-taking time and demonstrative
examples.

- Participants’ photos yielded diverse, but fruitful conversations around participants’ experiences and how those experiences impacted their identities.
- Hosting a public photo exhibit in collaboration with participants and local authorities posed numerous challenges but is important for impactful research.

**Practical Lessons Learned**

Our study had many layers that presented challenges to our research team. So, the practical lessons learned below relate not only to our method, but the overall execution of our research study. They can offer useful advice for researchers hoping to undertake ethical, collaborative, engaged, participatory, and/or visual research with Indigenous or other marginalized communities.

1. **Be flexible with your method.** We generally found that PCI was an effective method for addressing our research questions. Participants were able to adequately describe how postsecondary education had impacted their identity development and we gained insights into how postsecondary education can be improved to better support students. Generally, PCI uses original photos taken by participants to prompt discussion. However, when some participants showed up with old family photos or photos taken from the internet, we decided to be flexible rather than restrictive. Although these “found” photos (Margolis, 1994, 1999), were not in alignment with PCI, they still elicited rich data about participants’ identities and experiences. Fieldwork requires flexibility—answering your research question might require an adaptation of your methods. This issue also prompts us to rethink the bounds of the PCI method itself.

2. **Give very clear instructions to participants to ensure that research is ethical.** In addition to the unexpected submission of found photos, we also found that many participants failed to follow instructions on not taking photos of people without their consent. Several participants’ photos featured the faces of other people, including large crowds and strangers. Some also featured small children, which required extra parental consent. This presented us with ethical challenges and ultimately meant that many photos could not be used in presentations and publications, as we needed to ensure that we followed our IRB’s requirements as well as Indigenous research ethics. Because photos are not used as data for PCI, this is not inherently an integrity issue for this study. Participants’ narratives alone can be used to address our research questions. However, as most other photo-elicitation-type methods directly tie findings and analysis to the photos (Harper, 2002), we have found that reviewers and journal editors question the “exclusion” of these photos in some instances. We suggest providing additional clarification of expectations, such as (very, perhaps over-detailed) training around ethics of photographic research, that more strongly emphasizes the importance of obtaining consent from subjects.

3. **Develop alternative strategies for recruiting and communicating with participants.** We also encountered challenges to establishing and maintaining contact with our participants. In part, this was due to connectivity issues in rural communities. At the time of recruitment and data collection
in Cusco, many of our participants were living in (or commuting back and forth to) their home communities in the rural mountains or jungle. Many of these communities do not have internet access or reliable cellular service, so participants often could not be reached by email or phone. In addition, as most cellular plans in Peru are prepaid, and because many of our participants are considered low-income in this context, some would run out of credit on their phone plans, which also made them unreachable. We lost a few participants due to these challenges. We suggest recruiting more participants than you think you will need. Also, accounting for participants’ context in your data collection strategy is important. For example, to get through to some participants, we asked one of their friends to try to get in touch with them. This often worked.

4. **Find the right interval between asking participants to take photos and interviewing them.** Eliciting deep, quality data requires giving participants enough time to think about what they want to take pictures of, to visit places that are important to them, and to take enough pictures to adequately represent their responses to the prompt. Participants’ age will likely play a factor in this decision. Two to 3 weeks worked well for our participants. For younger participants, as we have learned in other studies (e.g., Johnson & Levitan, 2020), 1 week or maybe even 2 to 3 days might work best, while more time might be warranted for older participants who are less familiar with photography. It will also depend upon participants’ level of excitement and their competing interests. Participants who are more excited about the research project or who have other responsibilities might require more time.

5. **Select interview locations that are comfortable and safe.** Logistically, due to its location and tech capabilities, the sitting room of our apartment worked well for our interviews. However, after two female participants arrived with a friend, we learned that being invited to a private residence made them question their safety. In hindsight, this may have limited the kinds of information shared with us and/or our ability to recruit some participants. Researchers should carefully consider the research spaces that they create and ensure that participants feel comfortable and safe. This is particularly important when conducting research in culturally different contexts, and with culturally different participants.

**Section Summary**

- Researchers should be flexible with methods and communication plans, provide participants with clear instructions and ample photo-taking time, and choose interview locations thoughtfully.

**Conclusion**

As evidenced in this case, when it comes to conducting research with Indigenous and other marginalized communities, flexibility is key. The success of our project depended on our willingness and ability to be flexible in the use of our method, in our interviewing techniques, in our communication with participants, and in our expectations for disseminating results. The success of this project also relied upon our relationships with the people in our research setting, our prior understandings of the cultural context, and our commitments to
engaging in ethical research practices contextual to that cultural context. While lessons learned from our case certainly apply to research conducted with Indigenous groups throughout Latin America, we believe they also apply when conducting research with members of marginalized communities in other contexts—particularly research that is collaborative, visual, and/or action-oriented to impact practice and policy.

**Section Summary**

- Conducting ethical research with marginalized communities requires flexibility and contextual knowledge.
- Lessons from this study are transferrable to other contexts where Indigenous students are marginalized in postsecondary education, and where researchers seek to use collaborative, visual, or action-oriented methods.

**Classroom Discussion Questions**

1. What kinds of research questions can be addressed by photo-cued interviewing or other photo-based approaches?
2. What are the pros and cons of using photos as a prompt for interviews?
3. What are some challenges when conducting research in international and cross-cultural contexts, and how might you overcome them?
4. Why is it important to incorporate an action-oriented component into a research project that engages with marginalized communities?

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**Further Reading**

Johnson, K. M. (2020). Hotdog as metaphor: (Co)Developing stories of learning through photo-cued interviewing. Teachers College Record, 122(9).


References


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