

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Weaving Sight and Self: Integrating Photovoice With Scholarly Personal Narrative in Trauma-Informed Participatory Research With Marginalised Students

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This article introduces Photovoice-Scholarly Personal Narrative Weaving, an innovative methodology that integrates participant-generated visual inquiry with researcher reflexive narrative within participatory action research and trauma-informed frameworks. Drawing on Wang and Burris's (1997) Photovoice methodology and Nash and Bradley's (2011) four-phase scholarly personal narrative framework (Pre-search, Me-search, Re-search, We-search), I develop a systematic approach for conducting participatory visual research while honouring researcher positionality. The weaving metaphor, offered with gratitude and accountability toward the Indigenous knowledge traditions that inform relational research practice, captures how these methodological strands maintain their integrity while creating emergent analytical patterns. This article addresses a persistent methodological gap: Photovoice centres participant voice yet renders researchers largely invisible, while scholarly personal narrative centres researcher experience yet risks marginalising community perspectives. I demonstrate how careful integration creates parallel narratives that illuminate shared structural conditions without claiming equivalence. Drawing on illustrative examples from research with international students navigating precarity in Canadian higher education, I introduce practical analytical approaches including kitchen-table analysis, protective divergence, and calibrated vulnerability. The article provides step-by-step implementation guidance with tables summarising key principles, phase-by-phase activities, and materials checklists. The methodology offers researchers committed to participatory principles a replicable framework for making positionality visible while maintaining ethical accountability to participants.

I am sitting in my car in the campus parking lot, engine off, watching students walk toward the building where I teach. It is January 2025, and news of federal study permit caps has just broken. International students, who pay triple the tuition I help collect, face sudden uncertainty about their futures in Canada. Some have already received emails questioning their visa renewals; others wonder whether the pathways to permanent residence they were promised will materialise. I am about to facilitate a Photovoice session where these students will photograph their experiences of belonging

and exclusion. And what does it mean to invite people into visual self-documentation of precarity when I inhabit my own form of institutional uncertainty?

As a contract faculty member with nineteen years of teaching but without permanent employment, I occupy a peculiar position in the neoliberal university. I am simultaneously an insider and an outsider, a holder of institutional authority and a subject of institutional precarity. The students I am about to meet face their own version of this paradox: recruited as essential contributors to university revenue, yet excluded from the security their tuition ostensibly purchases. We share something, I suspect, though I am uncertain what language might capture it without claiming false equivalence.

This moment crystallises the methodological question driving this article: How do researchers conduct participatory visual research when they share structural locations with participants? And more specifically, how can we make researchers' positionality visible without appropriating participants' voices or claiming false equivalence? Traditional approaches to qualitative research position the researcher as either an invisible instrument or a confessional subject. Neither approach serves my purposes. I seek something different: a methodology that weaves researcher reflexivity with participant voice, creating parallel narratives that illuminate shared structural conditions while respecting the distinctiveness of other positions within those structures.

Purpose and Contribution

This article presents a methodological contribution to participatory visual research. It is a methods paper rather than an empirical research report. The primary offering is the methodology itself, Photovoice-Scholarly Personal Narrative Weaving, and the empirical study that follows serves as an illustrative application demonstrating how the methodology functions in practice. The methodology is designed for researchers who share structural locations with their participants and wish to make that positionality methodologically productive rather than merely acknowledged. I provide both theoretical grounding and practical guidance on implementation, recognising that participatory researchers need concrete tools alongside conceptual frameworks.

I wish to be clear about the scope and boundaries of this research. The illustrative application involves international business students navigating precarity in Canadian higher education. This is settler research, conducted by a settler scholar. I carry complex heritage, first-generation Austrian immigration, French Acadian roots, and distant Mi'kmaq ancestry from the 1700s, but I carry no claim to Indigenous identity. My engagement with Indigenous scholarship throughout this article reflects an ethical responsibility: this research was conducted on unceded Secwépemc territory, and any methodology developed in that context carries obligations to consider

its relation to Indigenous knowledge systems and colonial research histories. I draw on Indigenous scholars with gratitude and accountability rather than claiming their traditions as my own.

I use the metaphor of weaving, offered with deliberate acknowledgement of the relational, place-based, and ceremonial knowledge systems from which textile metaphors draw meaning. Weaving traditions exist across cultures as practices of integrating distinct elements into coherent wholes. In Indigenous knowledge systems, related practices carry particular significance: Kimmerer's (2013) work on sweetgrass braiding teaches that each strand retains its integrity while creating something stronger through interrelation; the Māori concept of He Awa Whiria (braided rivers) describes distinct knowledge streams flowing alongside one another with equal strength (Macfarlane et al., 2015); and Mi'kmaq Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) integrates Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (Bartlett et al., 2012). I draw on these traditions with gratitude and respect, learning from them as ethical guides rather than claiming them as my own. My use of weaving describes how methodological strands can "touch and separate" throughout the research process (Watson, 2020), maintaining distinct integrity while creating emergent patterns that neither produces alone. The weave is stronger than any single strand precisely because of the interworking.

The methodology addresses a persistent gap in participatory visual research. Photovoice, developed by Wang and Burris (1997) and refined by Wang (1999), centres participant voice through photography and collaborative interpretation. Its three core goals, enabling community members to record strengths and concerns, promoting critical dialogue, and reaching policymakers, position Photovoice firmly within traditions of participatory action research (PAR). Yet this centring of participant voice can render researchers invisible, obscuring how their positionality shapes research design, interpretation, and representation.

Scholarly personal narrative (SPN), articulated by Nash (2004) and systematised by Nash and Bradley (2011), centres researcher experience as legitimate scholarly data. Nash's four-phase framework, Pre-search, Me-search, Re-search, and We-search, guides the movement from personal experience to scholarly contribution through critical reflection and theoretical engagement. Yet SPN's centring of researcher voice risks marginalising community perspectives and inviting charges of self-indulgence, concerns that Stahlke Wall (2016) addresses in her framework for "moderate autoethnography."

By weaving these approaches, I propose a framework that makes the researcher's positionality visible while maintaining ethical accountability to participants. The result is what I term *parallel narratives*: researcher and participant accounts that run alongside each other, illuminating patterns across different institutional positions while respecting the distinctiveness of each experience. This creates resonance without equivalence, recognition of shared structural conditions alongside acknowledgement that those

conditions distribute differently across differently positioned bodies. The international student's precarity differs from that of the contract faculty member, yet both emerge from the same neoliberal institutional logics.

The article proceeds through five main sections: theoretical foundations that establish the scholarly basis for integration; the integrated methodology that explains how the weaving works; step-by-step implementation guidance for researchers wishing to adapt this approach; an illustrative application that demonstrates the methodology in practice; and ethical considerations that address the distinctive challenges this approach presents.

Theoretical Foundations

Photovoice: Origins and Relevant Adaptations

Photovoice emerged from Wang and Burris's (1997) foundational work, which integrated documentary photography with participatory action research. Grounded in Freire's critical pedagogy, feminist theory's attention to whose knowledge counts, and documentary photography traditions, the methodology established three core goals: enabling people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, promoting critical dialogue through group discussion of photographs, and reaching policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370). Wang (1999) subsequently introduced the SHOWeD protocol as a structured approach to critical reflection on photographs.

Recent scholarship has expanded Photovoice in directions that inform the woven methodology. Fricas (2022) developed an anticolonial Photovoice framework addressing power dynamics and community ownership. Anderson et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of Photovoice with Indigenous young people and identified cultural adaptations that honour community protocols. Versey (2024) argues convincingly that Photovoice can serve as a method for interrogating positionality and critical reflexivity when researchers turn the lens on themselves, a reflexive application that remains underexplored in the literature and that the woven methodology systematises.

Despite these strengths, Photovoice carries a methodological limitation that the woven approach addresses: its emphasis on participant voice can paradoxically render researchers invisible, present as facilitators but absent as positioned subjects whose experiences shape every dimension of the research process.

Scholarly Personal Narrative: Framework and Relevance

SPN emerged from Nash's (2004) argument that personal experience can generate rigorous knowledge when subjected to critical reflection and theoretical engagement. Nash and Bradley (2011) developed a systematic framework organised around four interconnected phases. Pre-search involves identifying personal stakes, assumptions, and emotional investments. Me-search centres on personal self-inquiry and reflection on lived experience. Re-

search brings personal insights into dialogue with scholarly literature. We-search connects to universal themes and broader applicability, transforming personal narrative into a public resource.

The distinction between SPN and autoethnography merits brief clarification. While both centre researcher experience, SPN emphasises practical applicability and accessibility over cultural analysis and literary experimentation. Nash and Bradley's framework produces scholarship that deliberately moves toward connection with readers and contribution to professional practice. This orientation toward practical contribution makes SPN particularly well-suited for integration with Photovoice's action-oriented approach.

SPN faces legitimate criticisms that the woven methodology helps address. Stahlke Wall (2016) identifies concerns about self-indulgence, lack of analytical rigour, limited generalisability, and confusion between scholarship and therapy. By integrating SPN with Photovoice's participatory structure, the woven approach creates external accountability: the researcher's claims about "parallel experience" can be checked against the participant's visual evidence. Where the parallel is absent, the researcher acknowledges this through what I call *protective divergence*, explicitly acknowledging where the researcher's experience differs from the participant's.

Trauma-Informed Research: From Principles to Practice

Trauma-informed practice provides the ethical scaffolding for this methodology. The term refers to an approach that recognises the widespread impact of trauma, understands potential paths for recovery, integrates knowledge about trauma into research practices, and seeks to avoid retraumatisation (SAMHSA, 2014). The five core principles, safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment, originated in Harris and Fallot's (2001) work for mental health contexts and were expanded by SAMHSA (2014) to six principles, adding peer support and attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues.

I invoke trauma-informed principles on two specific grounds. First, international students navigating precarity during a period of federal policy upheaval (study permit caps implemented January 2025) occupy a structurally vulnerable position. Their participation in research documenting that vulnerability requires protective design, given that structural conditions create potential for harm that standard ethical protocols may inadequately address, even when individual participants carry no prior trauma history. Second, the researcher's own employment precarity creates conditions in which vicarious engagement with participants' distress requires intentional well-being protocols. Alessi and Kahn's (2023) Trauma-Informed Research Guidelines provide the most operationalised framework, specifying concrete practices for community entry, interview preparation, extending safety into data collection, knowing when to change course, and committing to radical self-care.

Table 1. Trauma-Informed Principle-to-Practice Mapping in Photovoice-SPN Weaving

SAMHSA Principle	Operationalisation in Methodology	Specific Practice
Safety	Graduated consent protocols for photographs; covering cloths for difficult images during kitchen-table analysis	Participants determine consent level for each image (session only / academic / public); images can be covered or set aside during analysis
Trustworthiness and transparency	Researcher's SPN process made visible to participants; clear attribution protocols throughout	Colour-coded sticky notes trace all interpretations to source; researcher photographs shared after participant themes documented
Peer support	Group Photovoice sessions; kitchen-table collective interpretation	Participants share photographs and stories with peers before researcher photographs introduced
Collaboration and mutuality	Parallel process design; joint knowledge translation	Both researcher and participants photograph; action recommendations developed collaboratively
Empowerment, voice, and choice	Visual sovereignty; participant-controlled dissemination; choice points throughout	Participants choose which images to share, how they are captioned, and control community exhibition design
Cultural, historical, and gender issues	Positionality documentation; protective divergence; decolonising orientation	Researcher documents differential positioning; cultural context of participants' photography choices honoured

Note. Principles adapted from SAMHSA (2014). Specific practices drawn from Alessi and Kahn (2023), Katz et al. (2024), and the author's implementation experience.

Katz et al.'s (2024) Photovoice for Change (P4C) programme, co-developed with youth aging out of foster care, provides a model for aligning each Photovoice stage with SAMHSA principles. Their three-meeting structure, designed for psychological pacing, informed the woven methodology's session design. Critically, several scholars challenge the superficial adoption of trauma-informed language. Petrone and Stanton (2021) argue for a shift from "trauma-informed" to "trauma-reducing" scholarship that interrogates how institutions themselves produce trauma rather than merely protecting individuals from it. Ginwright's (2018) healing-centred engagement advances beyond trauma-informed care by centring culture, agency, relationships, meaning, and aspiration. I hold these critiques as ongoing commitments: the woven methodology aspires to be trauma-reducing and healing-centred, rather than merely trauma-aware.

[Table 1](#) maps each SAMHSA principle to its specific operationalisation in the woven methodology, demonstrating substantive integration rather than abstract invocation.

Methods Weaving as a Conceptual Framework

Watson (2020) introduced the concept of methods braiding as "a technique for arts-based and mixed-methods research" in *Sociological Research Online*. Unlike triangulation (which seeks convergence) or traditional mixed methods (which often subordinates one method to another), weaving allows methods to "touch and separate" throughout the research process, maintaining distinct integrity while creating emergent analytical possibilities. I adopt Watson's framework while shifting from "braiding" to "weaving" as my primary metaphor, a decision I discuss in the Decolonising Considerations section below.

The weaving metaphor serves my purposes well. In textile weaving, individual strands retain their material identity while creating patterns that no single strand could produce. The fabric's strength emerges from the interlocking, yet each strand remains traceable throughout. Similarly, Photovoice and SPN maintain their methodological identities in my approach. I refrain from claiming to “do” SPN when facilitating participant Photovoice sessions, and I avoid equating my reflexive writing with participants' visual narratives. The strands remain distinct yet produce analytical insights through their integration.

Simmonds et al. (2015) provide essential precedent in their *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* article on “narrative-Photovoice methodology.” Their work demonstrates how photographs and narratives can function as “co-constitutive data sources,” legitimising boundary-crossing between visual and narrative traditions. My approach extends their integration in a specific direction: where Simmonds et al. combined Photovoice with participant-centred narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I integrate Photovoice with researcher-centred SPN, creating a dual-positionality method that makes both participant and researcher experience visible as methodological data.

Decolonising Considerations and Relational Accountability

I begin this section with a tension I cannot resolve, only hold. I have chosen to shift from “braiding” to “weaving” as my central metaphor, recognising that braiding carries specific ceremonial significance within multiple Indigenous knowledge systems. Kimmerer (2013) describes sweetgrass braiding as a sacred practice in which each strand, mind, body, and spirit retains its integrity while creating something that carries prayers. Tuck and Yang (2012) warn that when metaphors drawn from Indigenous experience enter settler scholarship without accountability, they risk becoming “settler moves to innocence” that recentre whiteness while appearing to engage with Indigenous thought. I take this warning seriously.

Yet the shift to “weaving” remains an incomplete resolution. Weaving, too, carries Indigenous significance across cultures. What matters is the relational accountability with which any word is used. I acknowledge that the woven methodology's relational principles, maintaining distinct integrity while creating something emergent through interrelation, are informed by Indigenous knowledge traditions I have learned from but cannot claim as my own. The Māori He Awa Whiria (braided rivers) framework (Macfarlane et al., 2015) teaches that distinct knowledge streams can flow alongside one another with equal strength. Mi'kmaq Two-Eyed Seeing (Bartlett et al., 2012) demonstrates that different ways of knowing can be held together without one dominating the other. These frameworks have shaped my thinking about methodological integration, and I name that influence with gratitude rather than appropriating their terms.

Situating this work on unceded Secwépemc territory requires honest engagement with decolonising methodologies. Smith's (2021) *Decolonizing Methodologies* provides a foundational critique of Western research paradigms and their historical complicity in colonial projects. Specifically, Smith's insistence that research is never neutral shaped my decisions about dissemination design: community-facing outputs controlled by participants exist alongside academic publications, ensuring the research serves multiple audiences rather than extracting knowledge for academic consumption alone. Wilson's (2008) relational accountability, the quality criterion that research is ethical when it maintains good relations with all those it touches, directly informs the ongoing consent protocols and visual sovereignty provisions built into every phase of the woven methodology.

Following Kerr and Adamov Ferguson (2021), who used Indigenous Storywork principles as Euro-descendant researchers under Indigenous mentorship while maintaining honest tension about potential appropriation, I position my engagement with decolonising scholarship as aspirational and ongoing rather than achieved. The territorial acknowledgement for this research carries a genuine obligation: conducting research on unceded Secwépemc land creates obligations to consider how that research either reinforces or challenges colonial knowledge structures. The woven methodology's commitment to participant-controlled representation, community-accessible outputs, and transparent researcher positionality represents attempts to honour these obligations, while acknowledging that genuine decolonisation requires ongoing action beyond methodological adaptation. As Pidgeon and Riley (2021) note, non-Indigenous scholars articulate principles of Indigenous methodology less clearly than Indigenous scholars, a limitation I carry with humility.

The Integrated Methodology

Research Design Principles

Photovoice-SPN Weaving rests on five foundational principles that guide design decisions across all phases. These principles address both the mechanics of integration and the ethical commitments necessary for responsible implementation with marginalised populations. [Table 2](#) summarises these principles with definitions and implementation guidance.

The Weaving Model: Convergence and Divergence

Following Watson's (2020) methods weaving framework, I conceptualise the integration as strands that "touch and separate" throughout the research cycle. At some phases, Photovoice and SPN converge in shared space; at others, they diverge to maintain methodological integrity. [Table 3](#) provides a comprehensive summary.

During Pre-search, the strands converge as both the researcher and participants engage in preparatory work within a shared trauma-informed design. During data generation, they diverge critically: participants

Table 2. Five Foundational Principles of Photovoice-SPN Weaving

Principle	Definition	Implementation Guidance
Shared structural location	Researcher and participants occupy analogous (though distinct) positions within shared institutional structures	Assess before beginning research; if no legitimate parallel exists, use alternative methods
Parallel process design	Researcher engages in visual and narrative practice alongside (yet separate from) participants	Create separate data generation timelines; the researcher photographs before participant sessions begin
Collaborative interpretation spaces	Physical and temporal spaces where visual data from both strands meet for pattern identification	Designate kitchen-table sessions; ensure large flat surfaces remain available across multiple sessions
Trauma-informed pacing	Both participants and researcher control engagement intensity and timing	Build choice points into all sessions; provide support resources; allow temporal buffers between sessions
Clear attribution protocols	Traceable origins for visual and narrative data throughout analysis and dissemination	Use colour-coded sticky notes; photograph all arrangements; maintain separate files by source

Note. These principles should be assessed and operationalised before beginning research. The first principle (shared structural location) is a prerequisite; if it cannot be established, researchers should consider alternative methodologies.

Table 3. Summary of Convergence and Divergence Points Across Research Phases

Research Phase	Relationship	Rationale	Key Activities
Pre-search	Converge	Establishes shared relational foundation	Joint orientation; researcher positionality statement; participant photography training
Data generation	Diverge	Preserves independence; prevents contamination	Separate photography periods; independent SHOWeD reflections; no sharing until interpretation
Interpretation	Converge	Enables pattern recognition across positions	Kitchen-table sessions; colour-coded theme identification; resonance and divergence mapping
Literature engagement	Diverge	Frees participants from academic demands	Researcher conducts Re-search; participants engage on own terms
Dissemination	Diverge	Different audiences require different outputs	Participant-controlled exhibitions; researcher academic publications
Knowledge translation	Converge	Unified advocacy for change	Collaborative policy recommendations; joint presentations to decision-makers

Note. Convergence indicates phases where strands share space. Divergence indicates phases where strands operate independently to maintain methodological integrity.

photograph their experiences independently, while the researcher photographs parallel experiences separately to prevent mutual contamination. During interpretation, the strands converge again at the kitchen table, where visual data from both strands is spread, arranged, and discussed. During literature engagement, the strands diverge: participants are freed from academic performance demands while the researcher carries the Re-search responsibility. During dissemination, the strands diverge to serve different audiences. During knowledge translation, they converge again as both contribute to action recommendations.

The discipline of knowing when to converge and when to diverge requires ongoing attention. I found myself tempted, particularly during emotionally resonant interpretation sessions, to collapse the distinction between my experience and participant experiences. The weaving model's structure provided protection against this temptation: the physical separation of data

Table 4. Kitchen-Table Analysis Materials Checklist

Material	Quantity/Specification	Purpose
Printed photographs	All participant and researcher images at 4x6 or 5x7 inches	Physical engagement enables pattern recognition
Sticky notes (4 colours)	Colour 1: Participant themes; Colour 2: Researcher themes; Colour 3: Resonances; Colour 4: Divergences	Maintains clear attribution throughout analysis
Yarn or string	Multiple colours, several metres each	Creates visual maps of thematic connections
Large flat surface	Table or floor space that can remain undisturbed	Allows arrangements to persist across sessions
Camera or smartphone	Capable of clear overhead shots	Documents arrangements before reorganisation
Covering cloths	Soft fabric to place over difficult images	Provides protective holding for trauma-informed practice

Note. All materials should be gathered before the first kitchen-table session.

generation phases, the colour-coded attribution in analysis materials, and the explicit documentation of weave points all served as reminders that resonance differs from equivalence.

Kitchen-Table Analysis

I introduce kitchen-table analysis as a distinctive contribution of this methodology. The term draws on Kohl and McCutcheon's (2015) concept of "kitchen table reflexivity," subsequently expanded by Folkes (2023), while adapting it for visual participatory research. The kitchen table serves both literal and metaphorical functions: a domestic space where photographs can be physically spread, arranged, and rearranged; an orientation toward relational knowledge-making that honours the everyday wisdom participants bring to interpretation.

In practice, kitchen-table analysis involves spreading printed photographs across a large surface area alongside sticky notes, yarn, and other materials to mark connections. This physical engagement with visual data enables pattern recognition that screen-based analysis can obscure; provides tactile engagement that honours embodied knowing; creates space for participants to physically arrange and rearrange their photographs, exercising agency over representation; and offers what I term *protective holding* for difficult material, allowing images to be set aside, returned to, or covered as needed.

Step-by-Step Implementation Guide

This section provides practical guidance organised by research phase. The guidance assumes familiarity with basic Photovoice protocols; researchers new to Photovoice should consult Wang and Burris (1997), Fricas (2022), or Hargrove et al. (2024) for foundational orientation.

Phase One: Pre-Search Preparation

Assessing Shared Structural Location

Before beginning, researchers must honestly assess whether they share a structural location with intended participants. This assessment involves identifying the institutional structures shaping both the researcher's and the participant's experiences, examining how the researcher is positioned within those structures, determining whether genuine parallels exist, and acknowledging how those structures affect differently positioned bodies. If no legitimate parallel exists, alternative methods are better suited to the research.

Preparing Researcher Materials

Researchers prepare their own materials alongside participant materials: a draft positionality statement, a reflexive journal, a camera or smartphone for parallel photography, and SHOWeD reflection templates. I recommend that researchers begin their own photography and journaling before the first participant session.

Developing Trauma-Informed Protocols

Drawing on Alessi and Kahn (2023) and Katz et al. (2024), researchers develop trauma-informed protocols addressing safety measures for discussing difficult experiences, choice points where participants and researchers can step back, communication norms for group sessions, and support resources for emotional responses.

Phase Two: Data Generation

During data generation, the Photovoice and SPN strands must remain separate. Participants photograph their experiences without knowing what the researcher is photographing. The researcher photographs parallel experiences without sharing these with participants until the interpretation phase. Participants receive cameras or use smartphones, orientation to the SHOWeD protocol, guidance on ethical photography, including consent for photographing others, and a timeline for image creation (typically two to four weeks). Simultaneously, the researcher photographs their own experiences of the phenomena under investigation, responding to the same prompt adapted to the researcher's position.

Phase Three: Kitchen-Table Analysis Sessions

Kitchen-table sessions proceed through several stages: participants spread their photographs; initial discussion invites sharing; theme identification uses sticky notes, with participants controlling their own themes; researcher photographs are introduced after participant themes are documented; resonance mapping identifies shared experiences; and divergence documentation notes where experiences differ. Throughout, attribution must remain visible through colour coding, physical separation, and photographic documentation of all arrangements.

Table 5. Photovoice-SPN Weaving: Complete Methodology at a Glance

Phase	Photovoice Strand	SPN Strand	Strand Relationship	Suggested Timeline
Pre-search	Participant orientation; photography training; ethics protocols	Researcher positionality statement; reflexive journal begun; parallel photography initiated	Converge	2–4 weeks
Data generation	Participants photograph; SHOWeD narratives; group sharing sessions	Researcher photographs; reflexive journaling; SHOWeD reflections	Diverge	2–4 weeks
Interpretation	Participant themes identified; images arranged	Researcher themes identified; images introduced after participant themes documented	Converge	2–3 sessions
Literature engagement	Participants engage on own terms (optional)	Researcher Re-search: connecting themes to scholarship	Diverge	4–8 weeks
Dissemination	Participant-controlled exhibitions and presentations	Academic publications; conference presentations	Diverge	Ongoing
Knowledge translation	Joint policy recommendations	Joint advocacy materials	Converge	Ongoing

Note. Timelines are approximate and should be adapted to context. The methodology is designed for flexibility within the structural discipline of convergence and divergence points.

Phase Four: Literature Engagement and Writing

The researcher carries the “Re-search” responsibility of connecting themes to scholarly literature. Participants engage with academic sources on their own terms and on their own timeline. Writing follows a parallel-narratives structure: participant voices presented in their own words alongside the researcher’s reflexive narrative. Protective divergence findings are explicitly documented where they occur.

Phase Five: Dissemination and Knowledge Translation

Dissemination diverges to serve different audiences. Participants control community-facing outputs; the researcher produces academic outputs. Knowledge translation activities may reconverge the strands as researchers and participants collaborate on policy recommendations and advocacy materials.

Illustrative Application

Study Context

The methodology I describe emerges from research with international business students at a Canadian university located on unceded Secwépemc territory in British Columbia. Four participants (using pseudonyms Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Epsilon) engaged in Photovoice documentation of their experiences navigating precarity in Canadian higher education; a fifth participant (Gamma) exercised their right to withdraw.

This research received ethics approval from the host institution’s Research Ethics Board. All participants provided written informed consent covering: voluntary participation, right to withdraw at any time without consequence (exercised by one participant who withdrew after the second session without providing a reason, as is their right), photograph-specific consent at three

levels (session discussion only, academic publication with identifying details obscured, or unrestricted sharing), and data storage protocols. Participants chose their own pseudonyms. The study was conducted between May and August 2025.

The research occurred during a period of significant policy upheaval. In January 2025, the Canadian federal government implemented study permit caps that substantially reduced international student intake. Perry and Bethune (2024) documented Photovoice research with international students in Nova Scotia; my research extends their work by integrating SPN and by attending to parallel precarity between students and contract faculty.

My position as contract faculty placed me in a structural proximity to these students that shaped every dimension of the research. Like them, I experience institutional uncertainty; my employment renews semester by semester despite nineteen years of teaching. Unlike them, I am Canadian-born, English-speaking, and white, differences that shape how institutional precarity manifests in my daily experience. These parallels and divergences became central to the woven methodology.

I wish to be transparent about the degree of participant involvement in methodology development. The Photovoice-SPN Weaving framework was researcher-designed; participants shaped its implementation rather than co-creating its architecture. However, participants shaped its implementation in meaningful ways: Beta suggested adding an informal photograph-sharing session before the formal kitchen-table analysis, which was adopted and improved the process; Alpha requested permission to photograph at night, which expanded the photography protocol; and Delta asked whether she could include photographs from her home country, prompting a productive discussion about temporal and geographic boundaries in visual data. Participants reviewed this manuscript before submission and had the authority to request changes to the representation of their photographs and narratives. Future applications of this methodology might incorporate participant co-design from the outset, and I acknowledge this as a limitation of the present study.

Example One: Parallel Recognitions

Alpha photographed a recently renovated student lounge, noting that despite institutional investment in the space, it remained “always empty” during his time on campus. His SHOWeD narrative identified a pattern: the university had invested in visible symbols of student support, while actual use remained constrained by work schedules, commute times, and economic necessity. The beautiful furniture sat unused; the welcoming space remained unwelcoming in practice.

In my parallel reflexive work, I documented my own hesitation around faculty spaces. The faculty lounge exists; I rarely enter it. As contract faculty, I am officially part of the institution yet perpetually temporary, never sure whether I belong in spaces designated for “faculty” when my employment renews semester by semester.

Kitchen-table analysis revealed this pattern across multiple participant photographs: institutional investment in visible inclusion alongside persistent barriers to actual belonging. The parallel between Alpha's experience and my own illuminated a structural dynamic: the gap between performative inclusion (renovated spaces, diversity statements, welcome events) and substantive access (time, security, genuine belonging). This recognition emerged from the weaving, with Alpha's image and my reflection illuminating patterns neither would have surfaced with such clarity on its own.

Critically, I claim resonance without equivalence. Alpha's relationship to that lounge differs from my relationship to faculty spaces. His tuition directly funds institutional operations; my labour directly delivers curriculum. We occupy different positions in the university's political economy despite sharing experiences of uncertain belonging. The woven analysis illuminates shared structural conditions while respecting the distinctiveness of our positions within them.

Example Two: Protective Divergence

Beta photographed the campus food bank, documenting her experience of food insecurity during her studies. Her SHOWeD narrative described the shame and gratitude intertwined in using services designed for students who "should" be thriving yet struggle to eat. The photograph captured the discreet location, the careful anonymity the service provides, and the reality that international students face higher rates of food insecurity due to work-hour restrictions and family obligations abroad.

Here, the woven methodology revealed something different: I have no parallel experience. As a contract instructor, my employment is precarious, but I have never faced food insecurity during my teaching career. I could construct a strained metaphor, but such a comparison would be dishonest and potentially harmful, appropriating material deprivation to describe professional frustration.

I term this *protective divergence*: explicitly acknowledging where the researcher's experience diverges from the participant's experience, thereby preventing inappropriate comparisons while maintaining methodological transparency. The weave gap becomes analytical data. Beta's food insecurity reveals how precarity distributes differently across differently positioned bodies. My employment uncertainty manifests as professional anxiety; hers, as hunger. The divergence illuminates the differential materiality of institutional precarity, a finding that only emerges when the researcher honestly documents where parallel experiences fail to materialise.

Example Three: Visual Abstraction as Protection

Epsilon's photographs frequently employed shadows, reflections, and silhouettes, visual abstractions that communicated experience without direct documentation. One image showed his shadow falling across an empty hallway; his SHOWeD narrative described feeling "like a ghost" in institutional spaces designed for others.

Rather than requesting more “concrete” images, I understood this visual abstraction as a protective strategy, a trauma-informed choice to communicate challenging experiences while maintaining safe distance. Honouring this choice means accepting abstraction as a legitimate form of visual communication, indeed as sophisticated visual rhetoric (Glaw et al., 2017). In my parallel SPN work, I found myself drawn to similar strategies, reaching for metaphor rather than direct description when writing about feeling invisible in departmental meetings. This parallel in protective strategies warrants analysis: both the participant and the researcher, facing different forms of institutional precarity, employ abstraction to communicate experiences that direct representation might expose too much of.

Ethical Considerations

Ongoing Consent and Visual Sovereignty

Teti (2019) addresses “the murky ethics of visual qualitative methods,” identifying challenges around consent, anonymity, and data use that standard protocols inadequately address. The woven methodology responds with graduated consent protocols that distinguish levels of image use. Participants determine these distinctions for each image, and decisions can change throughout the research process. Visual sovereignty means participants control how their images are displayed, captioned, interpreted, and circulated. Smith et al. (2024) emphasise that participant control over representation is an ethical necessity and a methodological imperative.

All participants reviewed this manuscript before submission and had genuine authority to request changes. Alpha requested that a specific photograph be withheld from reproduction; his request was honoured without question. Beta suggested additional context for her food bank narrative, which was incorporated. The question of participant co-authorship was discussed openly; participants preferred acknowledgement over co-authorship given the manuscript’s methodological focus, a decision I respect while recognising that future publications drawing more heavily on empirical findings should revisit this question.

Researcher Wellbeing and Calibrated Vulnerability

Wallace and County (2024) document vicarious traumatisation among qualitative researchers engaging with difficult material. The woven methodology builds researcher wellbeing protocols into its design: reflexive journaling after each participant session; designated temporal buffers between data collection and analysis; regular consultation with supervisors; and explicit permission to step back from the material when needed.

I introduce the concept of *calibrated vulnerability* to describe the researcher’s careful decisions about which experiences to disclose, how to frame them, and where to maintain boundaries. The SPN component invites genuine self-disclosure, yet “genuine” is incompatible with “complete.” Researchers, particularly those in precarious positions, face professional risks

from self-disclosure that must be honestly weighed. This is especially important for contract faculty and other precariously employed researchers who lack the institutional protection that tenure provides.

Positionality in Motion

Sibbald et al. (2025) critique superficial positionality statements that list researcher characteristics without examining how positionality shapes research practice. The woven methodology responds by building positionality documentation into every phase. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) provide a practical framework for reflexivity documentation that distinguishes personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual dimensions. Throughout the research process, I occupied multiple positions: co-participant when creating parallel photographs; facilitator when holding space for participant sessions; analyst when interpreting visual data; author when drafting SPN; advocate when engaging policy audiences. Documenting how I moved between them is part of the methodology's transparency.

Discussion

Methodological Contributions

Photovoice-SPN Weaving offers several contributions to participatory visual methodology. First, it provides a systematic approach for integrating the researcher's positionality without undermining the participant's voice. The weaving model's convergence and divergence points create clear guidance for when strands should converge and when they should diverge, preventing both researcher invisibility and researcher dominance.

Second, kitchen-table analysis offers a relational approach to visual interpretation that honours embodied knowing and participant agency while enabling rigorous pattern identification. Third, the methodology demonstrates how first-person methods can be combined while maintaining distinct integrity. Fourth, protective divergence addresses a gap in reflexive methodology: when the researcher's experience fails to parallel the participant's experience, the gap becomes data rather than a problem.

The illustrative application involved four participants, a number appropriate for the depth of engagement the methodology requires. For researchers working with larger groups, the methodology can be adapted through tiered weaving (the researcher weaves with a subset of participants who then facilitate peer weaving), modified kitchen-table protocols for groups of 8–12, or digital adaptations following Ferlatte et al. (2022) and Ottoni et al. (2023). The core principle, maintaining systematic convergence and divergence between researcher and participant strands, scales more readily than the specific kitchen-table format, which may require modification for larger groups.

Limitations and Boundaries

The methodology carries significant limitations. First, it requires shared structural location between the researcher and participants; when no legitimate parallel exists, the SPN component risks becoming appropriative performance. Second, the methodology demands substantial resources: time, emotional capacity, physical space, and institutional support. Third, despite safeguards, the risk of the researcher recentring persists. Fourth, as a settler researcher drawing on decolonising scholarship, I am limited in claiming relational methodologies as my own, a limitation I carry with humility rather than resolution.

Fifth, the methodology was researcher-designed rather than co-created with participants. While participants shaped implementation through ongoing feedback, the structural architecture, the weaving model, the convergence and divergence framework, and the parallel process design emerged from my scholarly engagement rather than from collaborative design. Future applications should explore how participants might be involved in the design of methodology from the outset, potentially creating more authentically participatory methodological innovations.

Conclusion

I return to the parking lot where this article began. The methodological question I faced that January morning, how to facilitate participatory visual research while inhabiting parallel precarity, remains genuinely difficult. The woven methodology I have developed here holds rather than resolves the contradiction of researching precarity while experiencing it. What the methodology offers instead is a framework for making these dynamics visible, holding them in productive tension, and generating knowledge that honours both participants' expertise and the researcher's positionality.

The weave holds multiple strands in relation to one another. No strand dominates; each contributes distinct qualities to patterns that emerge from their interworking. When the strands converge, in kitchen-table sessions, in shared recognition of institutional failures, in unified advocacy for change, the resonance illuminates structural conditions that shape multiple lives. When the strands diverge, where my experience fails to parallel participant experience, where protective distance is appropriate, where different audiences need different outputs, the gaps become data about differential positioning within shared structures.

International students and contract faculty occupy different positions in the neoliberal university's political economy. Yet we share something, a structural precarity that manifests differently across our differently positioned bodies. The methodology I have developed here allows that shared condition to become visible without erasing the differences that matter.

I close with a final reflection. After sitting with my uncertainty, I gathered my materials and walked toward the building. I entered the room where my participants were waiting, four students who had agreed to photograph their

lives and share those images with me and each other. What followed was a mutual vision process. They showed me their campus through their cameras; I showed them my reflections in my journals. We found patterns together that none of us could have seen on our own. The weave we created holds stories of empty lounges and hesitant doorways, of food banks and faculty meetings, of shadows and abstraction. It holds, most importantly, a methodological possibility: that participatory research can honour both the voices of those we study with and the positionality we bring to that study. The strands remain distinct. The pattern they create belongs to us all.

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Use of AI and Digital Tools

In accordance with emerging guidelines for transparency in academic writing, I acknowledge the use of the following digital tool. All intellectual contributions, analytic interpretations, and scholarly decisions remain my own.

Grammarly. Grammarly was used for proofreading, grammar checking, and citation formatting. It assisted with surface-level edits only and contributed no substantive content, conceptual framing, or analytic interpretation.

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