

# Information and Learning: Trust, Place, and Migration

Verónica E. Guajardo,<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Gomez,<sup>1</sup> Sara Vannini<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Washington

## Abstract

Migrants face many barriers related to economic opportunities, language, and information needed not only to survive but to thrive. This poster highlights findings of *Fotohistorias*, a participatory photography research project spanning three countries and two years. This research helps to better understand migrant's values, learning and information needs, in particular the building of trust and its relation to place, which emerge as critical issues in the experience of migration.

**Keywords:** Participatory photography; photo voice; migration; immigration, learning; information grounds; social capital; social networks

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**Contact:** vero2@uw.edu, rgomez@uw.edu, sara.vannini.usi@gmail.com

## 1 Introduction

Refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, immigrants, undocumented, illegal, irregular—the titles vary, but the outcome is the same: people move for better opportunities. There's a continued need for better understanding of migrants' information seeking and learning behavior not only because migration is a centuries old human activity that will continue, but because it is prone to geopolitical factors that are ever-changing. In fact, only movement is constant.

This poster presents findings from *Fotohistorias*, conducted at a shelter for migrants in Nogales at the U.S.-Mexico Border, at a job-dispatch center for migrants in Seattle, WA, and with community organizations in Cali, Colombia. Settings reflect distinct moments in the experience of migration: the transient moment of the border, the precarious life of day laborers in the North, and precarious life of marginalized communities in the South. In addition to the differences, this project highlights the similarities of the experiences across the three settings, and the importance of trust and place in shaping the information behavior of migrants. We seek to answer the following research questions:

What are the information behaviors of migrants at different moments of the migration experience? How do trust and place inform these information behaviors?

Through participatory photography, we suggest unique features of information behavior among migrants, embedded in their daily life experiences and revealed through the combination of self-generated images and stories.

## 2 Literature Review

Past research has identified particularities in the information behaviors of migrants. For example, Fisher and Naumer (2006) point out that "immigrants have substantial information and practical needs for help with adjusting to life in a new country. Because of differences in language, culture, and other factors such as access, new immigrants are a difficult population to study." Other researchers discuss migrants in the context of communities rather than population.

Evans (2004) addresses the concept of communities in a contemporary globalized context, such as "real world" and "real-time" communities, or other internet communities that may form around theme, interest, etc. She argues that technology is often seen as the solution to many "social problem," yet in doing so there is a de-emphasis on other important factors such as trust, shared space, and what she calls local knowledge bases. Learning and information seeking in *place and space* are critical to migrants despite uncertainty.

Chatman's work on the "small worlds" applies to marginalized populations (prisons, janitors, etc), and adds to understanding of how these populations manage information among themselves ("social group"); they focus on learning that is prioritized due to immediacy, relevance, and practical concern (1991, 1996). Despite migrants' marginalized and often precarious lives, they contribute to society. They contribute to the US economy in a major way. In Washington State alone, undocumented immigrants contribute \$300 million in state and local taxes (ITEP 2013), despite being the nation's more "regressive

state tax system, taxing the poorest residents at 16.8 percent while taxing the top 1 percent at only 2.4 percent,” (Davis et al., 2015).

### 3 Methods

This project uses participatory photography as a way to elicit life experiences and information behaviors of migrants. The method evolved out of Wang & Burris’ (1994) photo novella to the photovoice method. To our knowledge, participatory photography has not yet been used to research information behaviors with migrants. The participatory photography approach used (Yefimova, Neils, Newell, & Gomez, 2015) was carried out with minor variations through the three research sites between May 2014 and May 2015. We conducted 7 *Fotohistorias* interviews in Nogales, 15 in Seattle, and 16 in Colombia for a total of 38 interviews. All interviews were conducted on site by Spanish-speaking members of the research team.

The *Fotohistorias* process consists of **four** main stages: **1) Collaboration with local organizations:** Partnership with local organizations at research location, we build relationships of trust to invite voluntary participation; **2) Photo generation:** Participants either borrow a basic digital camera or can use their own device for a set time (between a day and a week) and to share photos that represent their experience, identity and values, culture, and everyday life; **3) Conversation about the photos:** Participants bring back their pictures, and select those for conversation which are displayed on laptop screen; **4) Analysis:** The conversation is recorded, translated, coded and analyzed for emerging themes. The codebook developed in an iterative process, resulting in nine broad categories. Each photo interview transcript is coded and reviewed by at least two members of the research team for consistency.

### 4 Findings

We report findings related to information behaviors, and their relation with trust and place. Participants consistently reference someone in a specific place helping as key to their survival. That is, community centers or places of gathering seem to be critical to creating a learning and info-rich environment specifically as *place and space* that offers “social trust” in the lives of migrants. Building and maintaining trust, and dealing with the sense of permanence or impermanence in relation to place, are **two important features** that shape the information behaviors of migrants.

First, building and maintaining trust is important. Places such as “El Comedor” and “Casa Latina” offer a place/space where migrants can access services, although trust is not automatic despite their needs. Migrants at “El Comedor” and “Casa Latina” spoke about “hearing” from others that said agencies are “trusted” and helpful. Despite both sites being located at critical points in the lives of migrants we studied, information gathered from others (informed and validated by other local migrant, or infomediary) played a key factor into whether or not services were accessed. Once trust is established, participants spoke about the value and importance of the assistance. “Lourdes” states: “Our main purpose is to work. However, we are not alone because we are in this together... Honestly, I thought I had a unique story because I am a victims of domestic violence. However, I have learned that there are others who have lived longer and dealt with worst.”



Figure 1. Migrant worker “Lourdes” at Casa Latina (Seattle).

By contrast, indigenous and Afro communities in Cali, Colombia, although places of support and trust, its’ purpose is different. Here, community members look for ways to strengthen local economies by harnessing a local knowledge base to enable people to stay and thrive. A local states, “There is poverty here, but there is beauty and dignity. We want to have a community with social and economic future so that people don’t want to go away, so they want to stay in their territory.”



Figure 2. At community center in Cali, Colombia.

Second, continuous learning emerges as an overarching need for participants' at all three sites, although this is exhibited in various ways. In participants from Seattle, learning is related to knowledge that can assist with finding work such as English language classes.

Learning in Colombia is different and may take the shape of better serving the community, learning traditions in the indigenous or afro-centric ways, or working with elders to run for a seat for community Council. "Juan Diego" is asked why he stays: "For a sole objective and that is to move this community forward. This community sustains me... were it not for it, I would have left a while ago... we are doing social work with this indigenous community, especially with the kids, to see what we can assure for a better future."



Figure 3. On community with "Juan Diego" in Buenavista, Colombia.

Participants expressed a clear understanding that to survive and thrive, continued learning is a necessity, although it takes shape differently at each place and space. This is an overarching theme at all three sites.

## 5 Conclusions

Through participatory photography, we seek to better understand information behaviors of migrants at different moments of migration, as well as how trust and place inform these information and learning behaviors. Preliminary findings suggest that distinct moments of migration call for pivotal decision-making, and we note that varying **levels** of info-needs and behaviors emerge from each site:

- 1) There are unique learning and information-need experiences that are salient at the **transitional place** at the US/Mexico border which creates a unique sense of **transient lives**.
- 2) A unique **sense of impermanence** exists in the U.S., where lives are vulnerable due to the omnipresent threat of exposure of deportation, paradoxically a place where migrants learn/information to build more **permanent lives**.
- 3) There is a unique sense of **omnipresent migration** to another place due to the limited opportunities in the "hometown," as learning information play a critical role in the decision to migrate from an **otherwise permanent place**.

This work furthers a better understanding of migrants' information and learning needs, although more work is needed to better understand this ever-moving population.

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