Global Engagement

Guide to Ethical Photography

SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY • 1851 •

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ABOUT

This document is intended for SCU faculty and staff leading students in programs abroad. If you wish to use any of this material with students or other program participants, please be sure to include attributions and the following acknowledgements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge that the reproduction of the unethical photographs within this guide is a perpetuation of the harm we seek to eliminate. For this reason, photographs involving children within this guide are intentionally censored. It is our hope that readers can learn from these unethical examples as we continue to grapple with the question of what is warranted for the purpose of education versus damaging regardless of intention.

We recognize our limitations as neither ethicists nor experts in photography and relied heavily upon outside resources to construct this guide. This acknowledgement extends to our own personal and cultural biases as well. These guidelines were adapted and updated from the Code of Ethics originally created by Photographers Without Borders (PWB), the Social Media Guide created by Radi-Aid, as well as the Immersion Photo Guide created by the Ignatian Center.

This guide was most recently updated on November 19, 2020. If you would like to contact the authors, you may do so by emailing associateprovostglobal@scu.edu.

Introduction

It is important to be intentional when thinking about how one uses photography: does it build bridges? does it enhance engagement? does it reinforce stereotypes? does it focus on colorful pictures of minority groups because they are more "exotic?" In essence, it is crucial to involve intentionality in photography abroad. (Melibee-Global, 2015, p. 2).[1]

The Global Engagement Guide to Ethical Photos provides guidance on using cameras and social media intentionally and respectfully in cultures around the world. It is important to consider the ethics of taking photographs and videos, including how we engage with international communities. While abroad, there are opportunities to broaden your worldview and see our world from a different perspective. For many of us, supplementing our memories by taking pictures of people and places we have visited is an important part of our experience. There is often a feeling of pressure to "get the right shot," and in the process we forget to be fully present in the moment, which can potentially cause harm to the communities around us, regardless of our intent to do the opposite.[2]

This guide addresses four areas of ethical photography:
1. Autonomy
2. Do No Harm
3. Fidelity
4. Justice

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1. "Using technology appropriately: Photography - Calvin University." https://calvin.edu/dotAsset/0aca3bf7-8b16-4f3d-a1f4-908a9722234b. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
2. Ibid

1. AUTONOMY

Everyone has the right to participate or decline to participate. [3]

Questions to ask yourself before you take that photo or video:
- Has my photography subject(s) given me permission to photograph them and/or use their name(s). If so, was that permission to take a photo for a personal memory and/or to share the photo publicly?
- Is my photography subject of legal age to sign a consent form for themselves?

It is critical that you obtain consent, especially for capturing the likeness of vulnerable populations such as children, those with disabilities, marginalized persons, etc. Always remember to ask parents or caretakers for consent prior to taking a photograph; if guardians are unavailable, then do not take the photo.

The people you may wish to photograph have their own personal experiences and perspectives. As a photographer, it is your responsibility to amplify their voices rather than silence them. By allowing the personal experiences and perspectives of people you photograph to be heard, you decolonize the storytelling process. This means that you maintain awareness of your positionality and privilege, as a U.S. university student, etc.,[4] and strive to be a good ally and partner at all times. Being an ally includes making the effort to understand the historical context of your presence in the local culture and traveling with cultural sensitivity and an open mind.

3. "More Than a Profile: The Ethics of Digital Storytelling in Study ...." 9 Nov. 2015, https://www.slideshare.net/cieeorg/more-than-a-profile-the-ethics-of-digital-storytelling-in-study-abroad. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
4. "PWB Code of Ethics." https://www.photographerswithoutborders.org/code-of-ethics. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020

1.AUTONOMY

Avoid assuming that you know what another person is feeling towards you, whether it be gratitude, interest, etc. Perhaps that is what they are feeling, but that is their story to tell, not yours. The story you do tell through your photo or about your photo should not include you as the hero. An ethical photo should portray the complexity of your experience without requiring the spectator to make assumptions. An ethical photo will not solely focus on your feelings of being "touched", "overjoyed", or "in love". Speak about your entire truth, not the assumed truths of anyone else.

Key Takeaways:

- Acquire the full understanding, participation, and permission of the subjects whenever possible.
- Always ask for permission before photographing homes, stores, religious spaces/buildings, and so on.
- Follow local laws. Photography is banned in many places around the world.

Example:

This is a perfect example of an unethical and exploitative photo.

The woman is using other people as a prop for her photo with little respect for their personhood.[6]

[5]

5. "Who wants to be a volunteer?" 7 Nov. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcflrj_rRc. Accessed 21 Aug. 2020.
6. "Immersion Photo Guide." Ignatian Center. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.

2. DO NO HARM

Images are created and used in a manner that does not inflict harm to the people appearing in the photos.[7]

Questions to ask yourself before you take that photo or video:
- What if that were me, my child/parent/sibling? Would I want people around the world to see?
- Is this photo exploitative of the subjects in it?
- Does this photo reinforce a savior complex?
- What is the purpose of the photo? How can I use the photo or photos to promote a good cause while showing respect for the people in the photos?

Photographs play a large role in shaping how we view the world. When we take and share photographs, we are shaping how others view the world. This is an amazing privilege, and an enormous responsibility. With the ubiquity of photography in our daily lives, it is easy to forget how powerful images are; but, in the words of writer and curator Marvin Heiferman, "photography changes everything in its path."

When we take an ethical approach to photography, we increase our awareness of the impact that we are having on the world through the images we produce, and we are better able to focus our impact in a meaningful way.[8]

7. "More Than a Profile: The Ethics of Digital Storytelling in Study ...." 9 Nov. 2015, https://www.slideshare.net/cieeorg/more-than-a-profile-the-ethics-of-digital-storytelling-in-study-abroad. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
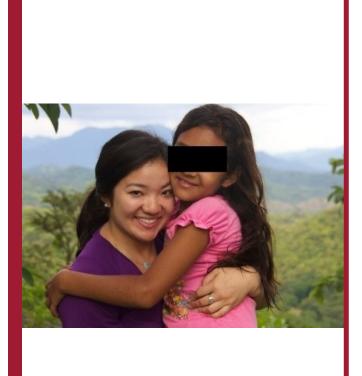8. "Photography Ethics and Why They Matter - Photography ...." 31 May. 2018, https://www.photoethics.org/content/2018/5/31/photography-ethics-and-why-they-matter. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.

2. DO NO HARM

Key Takeaways:

- Listen, learn, and represent your international community as accurately as possible while avoiding stereotypes such as "white savior"/colonial narratives, shaming, nostalgia, romanticism, cultural appropriation, cultural fetishism/exoticism and personal biases.[9]
- Avoid photos that communicate a hierarchical relationship between participants and locals (e.g. teaching, helping, saving). The best photos often depict shared activities that convey mutual learning and friendship (e.g making a meal together, dancing together, making something together).

Example:

This is an example of a photo that may be a great personal memory and with permission from the subject and guardian may be okay to share with friends and family. Just remember to include context, such as a personal story about how you know this person (i.e. This is __, and she was my host sister during my time in El Salvador. We had a blast making papusas together and she was a phenomenal tour guide). However, this photo is not appropriate for marketing use or social media.[10]

9. "PWB Code of Ethics." https://www.photographerswithoutborders.org/code-of-ethics. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.
10. "Immersion Photo Guide." Ignatian Center. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.

3. FIDELITY

Images are taken/used in a context that fairly represents the real situation, location, and subject identity depicted in the photograph [11]

Questions to ask yourself before you take that photo:
- Am I aestheticizing conflict or showing both sides; catering to voyeuristic tendencies or sensitizing? [12]
- What is the intent behind the photo? What story am I trying to tell? Does the image reflect that accurately? Or does it distort the situation somehow? [13]
- Would you consider sharing images that you take in communities with the beneficiaries of your support and/or with the leaders of the organizations you are visiting? Are you open to talking with them about their work in the community and how photos might help them portray their work and needs?

We enter an experience abroad as guests. When travelers visit impoverished communities or homes, taking photos with the intention of showcasing poverty dehumanizes and reinforces stereotypes about a group of people who lack material wealth. Examples of this include taking photos of houses, toilets, or neighborhoods in order to show those back home how impoverished an area is. The desire to document what is unfamiliar to you is understandable, but be aware that in certain instances doing so unintentionally objectifies impoverished communities.

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11. "More Than a Profile: The Ethics of Digital Storytelling in Study ...." 9 Nov. 2015, https://www.slideshare.net/cieeorg/more-than-a-profile-the-ethics-of-digital-storytelling-in-study-abroad. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
12. "Additional Questions on Ethics in Photography." 6 Apr. 2018, https://photographylife.com/additional-questions-ethics-in-photography. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
13. "Beyond poverty porn: photography, ethics, and development ...." 16 Jan. 2015, https://untilthelions.com/2015/01/16/beyond-poverty-porn-photography-ethics-and-development/. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.

3. FIDELITY

 If you choose to take photographs to document your personal encounter and experience in an effort to remember the impact it is having on you, just remember that it is likely inappropriate to share this with others as it is a form of unfair exploitation when seen out of context.

Key Takeaways:
- Plan your photographs rather than shooting freely without thinking carefully first. This will help you avoid many of the pitfalls mentioned above.
- Choose photos that represent people truthfully and show dignity, equality, support, and integrity. [14]
- When showing your photos to others, think about the implications your work will have in various communities.
- Think about what your photo will communicate to others in light of the fact that images and even video offer only limited context and perspective and tell only a part of the story at hand.

Example:

This photo is effective and ethical, but it is inaccurate.

Photos should emphasize solidarity and mutuality. This photo depicts a person serving and helping in a one-way manner. It lacks an element of mutual interaction with people from the local community. [15]

14. "Capturing/Sharing Your Experience & Ethical Photography ...." https://lsa.umich.edu/cgis/undergraduate-students/preparing-to-travel/capturing-and-sharing-your-experience.html. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
15. "Immersion Photo Guide." Ignatian Center. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.

4. JUSTICE

In keeping with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, your photographs will respect the rights, dignity, and worth of all people.

Seek to take photographs that do not portray age; gender; race; ethnicity; national origin; religion; sexual orientation; disability; health conditions; or marital, domestic, or parental status in stereotypical or reductionist ways. Strive to be sensitive to cultural, individual, and role differences in engaging with international communities.

Questions to ask yourself before you take that photo:
- Does the photo portray people as props or objects rather than human beings?
- Do I personally know the person(s) in this photo? Have I done the work to get to know them and their story enough to accurately share it if I have permission to do so?
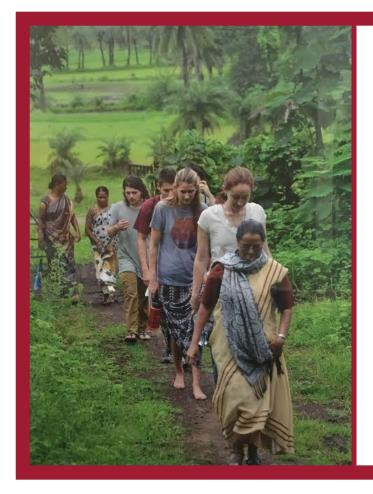
Key Takeaways:
- Learn about your host community and ask locals for ideas about what and how to photograph local people. [16]
- Abstain from using photos that potentially stereotype, sensationalize, or discriminate. Aim for complex portrayals of subjects that avoid reinforcing stereotypes. [17]

16. "Capturing/Sharing Your Experience & Ethical Photography ...." https://lsa.umich.edu/cgis/undergraduate-students/preparing-to-travel/capturing-and-sharing-your-experience.html. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
17. Ibid

4. JUSTICE

Key Takeaways (continued):

- Be aware that there is a long and often exploitative history of outsiders documenting what they perceive to be "exotic" subjects.[18]

- Avoid storytelling that involves you as a "voice for the voiceless". Inaccessibility to a platform and/or an audience does not make someone 'voiceless'. Work to ensure all voices are heard, respected, and valued.[19]

Example:

This is the ideal photo. It depicts a shared activity that conveys cooperation, friendship, and mutual learning. The photo reveals how a new friend encountered on a program abroad may guide a participant toward new perspectives about the world and the ways to work for justice in it.[20]

18."Capturing/Sharing Your Experience & Ethical Photography ...." https://lsa.umich.edu/cgis/undergraduate-students/preparing-to-travel/capturing-and-sharing-your-experience.html. Accessed 2 Jul. 2020.
19. "Why We Should Avoid Becoming 'the Voice of the Voiceless'." 8 Mar. 2017, https://inclusivus.org/inpowered-perspectives/2017/3/8/why-we-should-avoid-becoming-the-voice-of-the-voiceless. Accessed 2 Sep. 2020.
20. "Immersion Photo Guide." Ignatian Center. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020

Social Media & Self Branding

Social media gives us the unique opportunity to publicly document our own real-time biography while portraying ourselves in the way we wish to be perceived.[21] As such, it is also our responsibility to question our own motives and intentions for how we communicate our travel experiences through posts, hashtags, and geotags.

Questions to ask yourself before you post that photo:
- Am I posting this just for the "likes" or shock value?
- Am I using people as props to frame myself or my life as desirable and attractive?[22]
- Are pictures with or of my companions in traditional clothing or engaging in a cultural practice meant to make myself seem more "exotic"?[23]
- Am I centering (and documenting) my own self-transformation through temporary conditions rather than the long-term empowerment of local communities?
- Are my actions performative (for the consumption of an audience) or are they genuine?

21. "How To Communicate The World: A Social Media Guide for Volunteers and Travelers" https://www.radiaid.com/social-media-guide/. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.
22. "Branding White Saviorism: The Ethics and Irony of Humanitarian Discourse on Instagram" May 2019, https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1317&context=thesis. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.
23. Ibid

Social Media & Self Branding

Who to Follow on Instagram:

@nowhitesaviours

@barbiesavior

@pataxoyouth

@decononialatlas

@decolonizingpc

@shareenaclanton

Key Takeaways:

- Ask yourself first, "Who will see this and why is it important for me to share it?"
- Take this opportunity to break down stereotypes and tell a story that hasn't yet been told.[24]

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24. "How To Communicate The World: A Social Media Guide for Volunteers and Travelers" https://www.radiaid.com/social-media-guide/. Accessed 10 Aug. 2020.

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