

## **CHAHTA SIA “I AM CHOCTAW”**

### *Using Images as a Methodology for Cultural and Technological Discourse*

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**Abstract.** Unlike positivist quantitative designs, many qualitative researchers tend to dive right into data collection without benefit of an exploratory study or other pilot study. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to share an image-based methodology adapted from a community strategic planning process and applied to an exploratory study of one native American tribes reaction to cultural images and ICT's, and (2) to share the many benefits of a pilot study in advance of a larger qualitative research study, including opportunities for discourse around ICT's in relation to local culture.

## **1. Introduction**

The relationship between cultural artifacts and information and communication technologies (ICT's) is a complex one, especially so with indigenous cultures and disadvantaged or underrepresented populations. Culture is a distinct way people classify and represent their experiences with symbols and act creatively (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Researchers wishing to study the role of ICT's and cultural heritage are challenged in many ways: diverse questions related to curation and collection decisions/practices (Christen, 2006, 2008; Lynch, 2002), exploration of media (Ginsburg, 1991; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002; Srinivasan, 2006), interface design and acceptance issues (Brady, Dyson, & Asela, 2008; Keegan, 2007, 2008; Van House, Butler, Ogle, & Schiff, 1996), and designing methodologies that will yield meaningful answers specific to the culture they wish to understand and impact (Kaarst-Brown and Guzman, 2008). The majority of studies focus on textual and linguistic approaches. In addition, while some studies may include a “mixed-method design” (Creswell, 2002) using both positivist quantitative and interpretive qualitative approaches (Kaarst-Brown & Guzman, 2008), many qualitative studies tend to focus on remaining within a single paradigm, and rely at best on triangulated methods. Unlike

positivist quantitative designs, many qualitative researchers tend to dive right into data collection after they receive IRB approval, without benefit of an exploratory study or other pilot study to guide thinking about cultural methodology or research questions.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to share an image-based methodology adapted from a community strategic planning process and applied to an exploratory study of one Native American tribe's reaction to cultural images and ICT's, and (2) to share the many benefits for qualitative research of a pilot study in advance of a full study, including opportunities for new discourse around ICT's and methodologies in relation to local culture.

### 1.1. RESEARCH WITHIN A NATIVE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Historically, Native American tribes in the United States have had varied and largely exclusive cultures -- making it difficult for researchers to study and understand. When conducting research with Native people, consideration to their culture must be given. This includes having research reviewed by a tribe's own Institutional Review Board(s), conducting culturally sensitive and appropriate methods, showing respect to cultural knowledge-holders, and demonstrating reciprocity by giving back to the community and not just "taking" (Nielsen & Gould, 2007).

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma -- the Native American tribe that is the focus of this study -- has the mission statement, "*To enhance the lives of all members through opportunities designed to develop healthy, successful and productive lifestyles.*" The Choctaw Nation is in the business of its own peoples' well-being by offering programs and services designed to improve their quality of life. After overcoming the Federal termination policies of the 1950s, the Choctaw Nation has since flourished into a thriving multifaceted ethno-cultural, social, political, organizational, and commercial entity. In 1893, the Dawes Commission was authorized by the United States Congress to negotiate with the Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole) to dissolve the reservation system and accept land allotments in what is presently the state of Oklahoma. Today, their communities are shared and integrated with non-Natives, and they have made efforts to adapt without compromising their identity and heritage (Lambert, 2007).

Scholars suggest that a personal identification with a particular culture improves a sense of well-being (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Weaver, 1998). As such, the leaders of the Choctaw Nation have emphasized cultural heritage and its vitalization. Evidence of efforts to foster Choctaw culture can be found at the organizational level in a multitude of special events and festivals, language classes, traditional dance expositions, organized sporting competitions, arts and craft demonstrations and workshops, just to name a few. However, as previously defined, Choctaw culture can be found in the expression and activity of its people—not wholly of the organization.

### 1.2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This pilot study was designed as a part of a larger effort to help create a digital collection of culture for the Choctaw Nation. The culture to be represented by this collection is living and active today. Many scholars in ICT design assert indigenous user participation is paramount when designing a system that represents their own

culture (Boast, Bravo, & Srinivasan, 2007; Dourish & Button, 1998; Kujala & Kauppinen, 2004; Nichols, Witten, Keegan, Bainbridge, & Dewsnip, 2005; Srinivasan & Huang, 2005). With that spirit in mind, *we sought to develop an initial understanding of the types and nature of images the Choctaw people believe to be culturally significant, and also those they do not*. If we were to build a digital library of culture for the Choctaw, what images would the people feel best represented their culture and would embrace as a part of the collection?

Technology acceptance with respect to diverse populations and culture has been widely studied (McCoy, Galletta, & King, 2007). However, we sought not to know if the Choctaw people would accept a particular ICT, but whether *any* ICT would be welcomed in their cultural expression. Would the Choctaw people react adversely if an ICT was present and intended to be actively involved in the recording or display of culture?

Therefore, three methodological criteria for this exploratory study included: (1) an unobtrusive approach that took into account the reflexive position of the researchers, (2) an inclusive, natural setting that invited voluntary participation, and (3) a data collection instrument that allowed us to obtain a *visual* rather than a textual introduction to cultural artifacts valued by the Choctaw people.

### 1.3. VISUAL METHODOLOGIES

Language-based research methods have historically dominated social science research and cultural research. However, several social science researchers, like Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) and Gillian Rose (2005), assert that humans are "more visual and visualized than ever before" (Mirzoeff, 1999:1) through the multitude of visual media forms and technologies available today. The visual culture field is concerned with how information and meaning are portrayed in, sought, and consumed through visual technologies. An array of non-textual strategies of inquiry, or visual methodologies, is now available as an alternative way of conducting research. Rose (2005) extends a critical approach to visual culture through rigorous methods and positions their importance among traditional language-based methods by stating, "*Images are important not simply because...they are pervasive, but because they have effects...in relation to the construction of social differentiation*" (2005:69).

Participatory visual methodologies, such as photography, filmmaking, visual art, and illustration, offer a more nuanced depiction of reality while simultaneously engaging and empowering research participants. Through the generation of images, and the reflective sharing of this visual content among community members, participants expand their capacity to express their voice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Researchers similarly have found images an insightful way to explore organizational belief systems (Dougherty & Kunda, 1990); community values and priorities (King, 2008), the effect of images on intergroup relations (*viz.*, black, white, and Native) and their stereotypes (Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005); the content/story and other affective attributes of photos (Jørgensen, 1995), and the difference in historic imagery depicting Natives between white and Native artists (Vickers, 1998).

In summary, our original intent in this exploratory pilot study was to identify: (1) what types of images are considered significant to the Choctaw culture; (2) whether or

not there might be a particular aversion by members of the Tribe if the cultural image also portrays an ICT; (3) the similarities or differences in the image preferences of Choctaw of differing age, gender, region, or blood quantum (*i.e.*, the fraction of their lineage that is Choctaw), and (4) we also hoped this project would contribute to the design of a larger study leading to the design and/or building of a digital collection of their culture.

The next section of this paper presents details of the 2-phase methodology, as well as an overview of the results. We follow with a discussion of the methodology in relation to intended outcomes based on the exploratory research question. We then discuss the unintended outcomes of the methodology in relation to new opportunities for discourse about culture and ICT's. We close with some implications for researchers interested in cultural attitudes and ICT's.

## **2. Exploratory Methodology: Chahta Sia - Cultural Images of the Choctaw**

As outsiders to the tribe and this being the first attempt at conducting research with this population, we asked two separate tribal members with whom we had rapport about the effects our presence would have on participation. Both stated something to the effect that, "You will get more Choctaws to participate if you aren't there." As a result, the research design used in this study drew inspiration from the New York State community seminar of Brownfields Opportunity Areas Program led by Maren King (2008). Our exploratory study loosely followed her community-based approach to local strategic planning through the use of *participant prepared* visual images. Unlike her study, which encouraged researchers acting as facilitators in the community initiative, evidence suggested it would be better if we remain invisible during the research process. At the same time, we were similarly committed to encouraging community participation, uncovering local community values through images, and then analyzing and synthesizing results in relation to the exploratory research questions.

Our pilot design included a multi-phase approach, first obtaining photographs of cultural images taken by a sample of Choctaw families, and then having a different group of participants judge the images "more or less Choctaw".

### **2.1. PHASE 1: OBTAINING THE CULTURAL IMAGES**

In order to obtain photos, we sought out participants who were Choctaw by blood, as certified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The cultural heritage department at the Choctaw Nation gave us a list of potential families who might be willing to help us with our project. We identified nine Choctaw multi-generational families who were local to the location of the second author. We contacted a member of each of those families, and all nine agreed to participate. We gave two or three digital cameras to each of the nine family representatives, and we never met or knew the identities of any of the other family members involved. In this way, we did not engage directly and were invisible to the majority of those who participated in taking pictures. This also meant, however, that we were dependent on the contact persons providing the cameras to their other family

members. We asked that they and their family members take pictures of “items or activities that were the most or least Choctaw to them.” The same contact person returned the cameras to us after a couple of weeks.

After retrieving the images off all the cameras, there were 98 photographs total. The number of photographs taken by participants varied greatly. For example, one family took 40 photographs, while another did not take any photos. We deliberately did not question the contact persons about the process of taking photos, how they involved their family, or even if they did so. Upon examination of the photographs, we took care to either discard or disguise any information in the photographs that could identify the family or an individual person. For example, we used computer software to crop a photo that showed a particularly elaborate and potentially identifying tattoo. Also to protect their identities, the pictures were randomly ordered and serially numbered, information regarding the family that took each photo was not made known, and data was deleted off every camera used once the pictures were retrieved and coded.

In preparation for the second phase of the project, we grouped photos by the type of cultural activity or artifact they portrayed: buildings, clothing/jewelry, cooking/food, historic, original homesteads, landscape, language, religion, stickball/games, and technology. Some photos were coded as more than one category, for example, a one hundred year old building was both “historic” and “building”. We selected a few of the best photographs from each group based on image quality and how clearly it portrayed the cultural activity or artifact. The selection process yielded a total of 25 photographs for the second phase of the study.

## 2.2. AN ABSENCE OF ICT’S – ERGO “THE RINGERS”

Our families provided us with a wonderful diversity of photos; however, not a single photo included any visible modern information or communication technology (ICT). Given our research question, this in itself was informative. However, when we engaged a larger sample of the community in phase two of this exploratory pilot study, we needed to include some photos that did include ICT’s. At this point, we deliberately modified four of the 25 photos in subtle ways or created a surrogate cultural photo, introducing four “ringers”.

To concoct the ringers, the original photographs were manipulated by graphics editing software and combined with an easily recognizable ICT artifact in such a way that the ICT was shown in an active role of the cultural expression itself. The ringers were as follows: 1) a digital camera capturing an image of a youth in traditional dress with crossed stickball sticks, 2) a screenshot of a fictitious culinary website displaying the image and recipe of *plavska vlvvska* - traditional fry bread being cooked in a caldron over an open fire, 3) a woman texting an image of her beaded barrette and making comments about it on a smart phone, and 4) a screenshot of a fictitious Facebook webpage featuring an image and wall posts of Choctaw stickball. (See Appendix A – Figure 2.) The ringers were reinserted into the set of unaltered images and affixed to a large whiteboard in a grid layout (see Appendix B – Figure 3.)

### 2.3. PHASE 2: USING THE IMAGES FOR CULTURAL INSIGHTS

The next phase of the research required a preliminary sample of individuals from the larger Choctaw community who would comment on the photos and provide us with basic information through a simple set of questions. Again, our goal was that the researchers were invisible to the process, participation was not only voluntary but also self-selected rather than overtly solicited by an outsider, and participants were drawn from a broader representative of the Choctaw community that extended beyond the main headquarters or the location of the researchers.

#### 2.3.1. *Site Selection and Participant Recruitment*

To maximize the opportunity for a varied sample, the site selected for the survey was the Choctaw Nation's annual Labor Day festival, which is held during the first weekend in September. The festival draws nearly 100,000 visitors from all over North America to the tribe's spiritual capitol in *Tvshka Homma* (Tuskahoma), Oklahoma. At the festival grounds is a cultural venue where Choctaw artisans sell their wares and crafts to festival patrons. The board was set up at the front entrance to this building at 8:00 AM on the first morning of the festival. To encourage voluntary participation, participants and non-participants could enter a drawing to win one of six digital cameras. The researchers were not present during data collection, so as not to influence the results by appearing to observe. We did, however, check the board and take photos of the results at the end of each day to monitor progress over the two days. This also allowed us to verify final results and minimized the risk of deliberate or inadvertent tampering.

#### 2.3.2. *The Simple Survey Instrument – 4 Colored Dots and 6 Questions*

As noted earlier, the 25 images (including the four ringers) were developed into five by seven inch photographs and affixed to a large whiteboard in a grid layout. Signage and instructions were also placed around the photographs to draw participation and give guidance on how to complete the card questions, which made up our "survey". The participants were directed to take a card that had four colored stickers affixed to the corner - three green dots numbered "1", "2", and "3" and one red dot with an "X" printed on it. The instructions mounted on the board asked the participants to stick the green dots on the three photographs they felt were "the most Choctaw to them". They were also asked to stick the red dot on the image they thought was "the least Choctaw".

The card also had five basic questions on it: age, gender, city and state of residence, and Choctaw blood quantum. We also included one open-ended question asking them why they picked the photos they did, with room to indicate the photo number and space to write a short comment on each photo selected for their dots (see Appendix C – Figure 4.)

Pens, a clipboard, and drop box for their cards were provided. The board was mounted on a wooden stand and set at an appropriate height accessible for most adults. The board was pre-tested by a few Choctaws prior to being deployed. The researchers were encouraged that the pre-test participants were able to understand what they were being asked to do and complete the cards without assistance. They also offered constructive feedback on the signage and instructions that likely improved the eventual outcomes. Their unsolicited verbal feedback also indicated the survey was "fun" and

"appropriate". One woman said she "wanted more stickers," because she saw more than three photos she wanted to vote for; however, for purposes of our exploratory study we did not change this.

This early feedback suggested we had met our goals for a process that was not seen as invasive or disrespectful. "Fun" and "appropriate" suggested that our preliminary design was a good one as far as it went. During the actual "dot sticking phase of the study" as we came to refer to phase 2, we occasionally and inconspicuously hung out by the board to listen and watch some of the participants and how they interacted with the photo survey. We observed that participants took their time, studied the photographs, and discussed how photos related to specific memories or cultural expressions of their own, such as, "That old homestead reminds me of my grandmother's house." Upon completion of his selections, we overheard one participant stating to the others in his group, "That was cool."

#### 2.4. RESULTS: CULTURAL IMAGES AND ICT'S

By Sunday morning, the board had attracted 99 participants. Interestingly, only 52 people entered the drawing a camera, with the rest of the participants drawn into the research by inherent interest. We realize that 99 participants from many thousands who likely entered the arts and crafts center is a very small overall participation rate. It was, however, qualitatively very informative on many counts.

##### 2.4.1. *Overview of Findings*

There were 99 participants who stuck a total of 356 dots on the photographs. Our participant group was 62% female with a median age of 46 years. Also, the median for Choctaw lineage of our participants was one-quarter Choctaw by blood, but the top quartile of participants were between half and full-blood Choctaw. By counting "most Choctaw" votes, we determined the top five most popular images were: (1) a family home on an original allotment, (2) stickball sticks and the feet of players, (3) a religious hymnal in the Choctaw language, (4) fry bread cooking in a cast iron kettle, and (5) a digital camera taking a photo of a girl holding stickball sticks, which happened to be one of our "ringers". Our ringers also received votes. In Figure 1 below, we have a histogram of "most Choctaw" and "not Choctaw" votes for our four ringers. Notice the only image that was widely considered "not Choctaw" was the beadwork image depicted on a smart phone and shown in Appendix A – Figure 2.

The researchers also created a Classification and Regression Tree (CART) using a statistical software application to determine if we could discern differences in the individuals who stuck a dot on a ringer and those who did not. We found that Choctaws younger than 42.5 years were more likely to vote for a ringer than those who were older. Of those younger than 42.5, Choctaws from the less impoverished and more economically developed western portion of the Choctaw Nation were more likely to pick a ringer than their eastern cousins.

In summary, while we do not consider the findings definitive on the issue of whether and how Choctaw cultural images can be presented using ICT's, we feel this study was successful in beginning the exploration. These findings also highlighted the benefits of the annual meeting venue, which offered the greatest diversity of potential

participants. We know from this pilot study that there are Choctaw who are part of a broader digital community, as evidenced by the email addresses provided by some participants on their cards. This encourages further exploration of a digital collection of Choctaw culture.

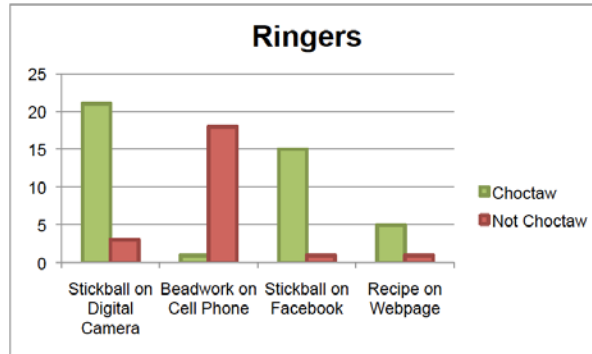


Figure 1. Histogram of Results for Technologically Enhanced Photos (Ringers)

#### 2.4.2. *The Benefits of the Methodology (Expected)*

We learned several things from our exploratory two-phase design inspired by King's (2008) community work. We learned that we will likely need to doctor some of the images to include ICT's rather than relying only on those produced by the Choctaw participants, or else be specific and request they include some technologies used by their families. We also learned that our efforts to be invisible and unobtrusive were paradoxically important to building rapport and being accepted in the community. We were successful in engaging a community that is hard to reach in a community setting. While our results were small in terms of sample size, the intent of the exploratory study was to experiment with the design's effectiveness in developing a qualitative and interpretive understanding of the role of visual images, rather than to obtain a large-scale set of results. We wanted to know if, and how, people would respond to the design and so gain initial answers to our question. In these ways, our test of the methodology was successful. We also benefited from several unanticipated lessons.

### 3. Informal Opportunities for Discourse – Priceless Insights

As noted above, the visual methodology delivered everything for which we had hoped. The benefits of the original design can be summed up as: (1) the value of balancing unobtrusive study with simple feedback, (2) the value of visual images in engaging the community related to their cultural expressions and values, and (3) the value of testing the research process. Yet, we perceive the greatest value from conducting this non-traditional pilot study of a qualitative design was how it enabled opportunities for discourse with members of the Choctaw community about the actual methods and goals of the study. Researchers traditionally engage participants in discussions about the



research questions, not about the *research design itself*. Our experiences with these unexpected opportunities for cultural discourse around a visual methodology have value for researchers who seek to use visually based methods in both indigenous and other communities, as well as for those who wish to follow other qualitative research designs. These include: (1) opening up a research agenda, (2) gaining insights for research design and methods, and (3) building relationships.

Informal opportunities for discourse came at three points in the study: (1) during preparation and approval stages (access); (2) during the execution of each phase of the study; and (3) after the study was officially completed. We present this as anecdotal evidence, drawing from field notes and researcher memos to support the value of integrating this rarely explored role of "pilot studies" as a formal part of qualitative research designs.

### 3.1. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL DISCOURSE DURING PREPARATION AND APPROVAL STAGES

Engaging with Native American communities as outside, non-native researchers is often challenging because of a long history of abuse and disrespect. As one of the researchers involved in this study was employed by the Choctaw organization, we had the potential of basic access to certain organizational members, but not necessarily broader access or acceptance in the Choctaw community. The process for approval of even the exploratory pilot study was long, rigorous, and involved many different departments and levels of the managing tribal organization. This also meant that we were exposed to many additional people who were not directly part of the research study. At the time, this all seemed peripheral, and like most researchers, we viewed this as a necessary hurdle on the way to our intended goal, rather than as part of the study itself. On reflection, we found several examples of how activities associated with *the process of preparing for the research* provided valuable opportunities for discourse.

As one example, while the second author was in the cultural heritage department gathering a list of potential participants for the photo-taking stage, a full-blood Choctaw language teacher came into the group and participated in the conversation. He gave us advice about interviewing other Choctaws, and he said to "never try and fill in the gaps of a conversation". He said, "If you tell something to an elder, speak deliberately and slowly, and when you're finished, be completely silent. If the elder doesn't respond right away, that means he or she is thinking, and you should be silent and even slowly nod to acknowledge and respect his or her time of contemplation. Then the Choctaw will respond when he or she is ready. To try and talk while they're thinking would be as rude as interrupting them while they were talking, and possibly more so". Our informal expert said if we did not follow this approach, we "would get nothing from them".

He also questioned the notion of "digital" with respect to his culture. He said, "To the Choctaw, what is 'digital'? We have no word for that. Our elders won't want to talk about digital things, because to them that's meaningless." In regards to the picture taking, he cautioned us, "Choctaws are pranksters by nature. Don't be surprised if you get back pictures of soda cans or something like that."

The caution about conversational protocols and the Choctaw's sense of humor were invaluable as we worked with the organization and with our contact persons

taking photos. It also increased our appreciation for the rigor and care shown by the phase two participants in later picture selection, as this supported that they took the methodology seriously and valued that their opinions were being solicited in a visual way that resonated with their values.

Equally important was the realization that there is no word for “digital” in the Choctaw language. This in itself highlighted the potential for inherent tension between cultural heritage and preservation or presentation in a digital format.

### 3.2. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL DISCOURSE DURING THE STUDY

Once both the University and Choctaw Nation Institutional Review Boards approved the study, we arranged a time to meet with a member from three of the families. As we sat down with each of them to explain our picture-taking request, they were noticeably quiet and seemingly unsure about what we were doing. However, once they started to feel more comfortable and understood what the cameras were for and what they were to do with them, they started reflecting about their culture. These reflections were not recorded as an official part of the data related to the research question, but as part of documenting the methods.

We found that this opportunity for discourse illuminated meaning that our initial methods could not: (1) that some Choctaw cultural knowledge is highly personal or private and cannot be captured or illustrated in images, (2) that there may be conflict between traditional, religious and modern cultural images or values among the Choctaw, and (3) that paradoxically, the typically matriarchal Choctaw culture might not be captured at the individual level, but in how they share meaning among the familial unit and participate in groups.

When is a picture *not* worth a thousand words? In relation to the first insight, one participant told us of her family gatherings. She said they would gather at their family’s cabins in a remote place for three or four days. She reminisced, “It’s July in Oklahoma, so of course it’s hot and sticky. We would sit under a huge old tree in the evenings and listen to my grandmother tell stories in Choctaw, because she knew very little English.” Her grandmother has now passed away. There are photos of the cabin, but we asked her if she had a little video camera, if she would have wanted to record the storytelling. With a tear in her eye, she replied “Yes.” She said they also played ball, and their family was big enough to play volleyball and softball together. She talked about how the older men would “take leave of their age and join in as if they were twenty years old again.” Cultural expression is obviously more than artifacts and images, but it may also be highly personal. Images may fail to capture much of the cultural knowledge and memories associated with them. The process of deciding which images, and the opportunity to reflect on them, however, offer methods for rich cultural discourse and engagement.

Decisions about what represent an indigenous people’s culture and values may present challenges related to conflict between tradition, religion, and modern cultural images. This second insight came from informal discussion another participant who shared a story of his regular family gatherings. The entire event centers on his grandmother. “Everybody is checking on grandma and making sure her needs are met,” he said. He explained that at the last gathering, his grandmother led the women in

making some traditional beadwork. He said those gatherings are what Choctaw culture means to him. He commented that his grandmother also knew traditional Choctaw medicine, but said most people will not talk about it. He said he hopes his "grandmother's medicine doesn't get forgotten". He also mentioned the ghost stories his grandmother tells, but stated that no one outside the family knows them because those beliefs are not as widely accepted now, and often makes people uncomfortable. Introducing less comfortable discussions through images can be successful in legitimizing issues not usually talked about (see also "Photovoice" – Wang and Burris, 2007).

Each of these stories supports our third insight that the cultural identity of the Choctaw people may not be captured in a study solely of individual preferences related to images, but in understanding of how cultural meaning is collectively shared and communicated through images and stories associated with them. In organizational studies, we rarely investigate an entire department. In this type of cultural setting, however, it may be necessary to interview or collectively engage the entire family unit to capture cultural experiences and how they interpret and share these experiences.

This is also highlighted in a brief story from one of the participants in the photo taking who commented that his idea of Choctaw culture is "in the past". His family still owns the original allotment they received in 1837 after the Trail of Tears. He said the original home place burned, but the family house that was built around 1890 is still there. He said one reason it is still standing is that the tin roof on the building is original. They have repaired the house with some new materials for structural integrity, but try to restore and reuse original materials as much as possible. He said the land is also his family's burial grounds. "All of my ancestors since the Trail of Tears are buried there". He said although no one lives there today, there are 12 grandsons in the family, and each one is assigned a month of the year when they go, mow the grass, weed the cemetery, and keep the place up. He commented, "It's rare, unfortunately, that my family gathers there. I wish they did more often."

The family homestead was a cultural image that appeared frequently in the photos. Its cultural meaning to this family is shared across multiple generations and dozens of family members. Visual methods may provide a common focal point for studying the multi-generational transfer of culture and how ICT's may support this (or potentially hinder it).

### 3.3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL DISCOURSE AFTER THE STUDY

There were several benefits for further discourse and engagement with participants after the study ended. For example, after picking up the camera from one photo-taking participant, he commented, "Anytime you need me to help, just give me a shout! I like things like this." While this was only a signal of willingness, this generosity would likely not have been offered to outside researchers had we not been willing to spend the time conducting the exploratory pilot study. The success of the pilot study and the relationships developed also added credibility with various senior tribal managers, making the likelihood of approval for future studies higher.

We clearly tapped into an important issue for the Choctaw people and the visual methodology was one that resonated with at least a few of them. One photo-taking

participant continued to send us photographs even after the data collection was complete. Of the 52 participants who entered the drawing, 21 of them checked a box on the card that they were willing to be contacted about this study or about their impressions of Choctaw culture. They left telephone numbers and/or email addresses. This provides us with a sample of individuals to contact for more detailed interviews and future studies.

Months after the project was completed, we received a phone call from one of our photo-taking participants. He said his elderly mother had asked him to call us and find out which pictures “won the photo contest?” She said she fully expected to see the results in the Tribal newspaper, something that we had not considered.

There is little doubt in our mind that our small, exploratory pilot study using a visual methodology has provided us with new insights into our initial question, our methods, and may provide a potential network of leads and participants for future studies. It has also created a focus of conversation and opportunities for future discourse that we might not have been privy to had we attempted a larger scale study without this pilot, and provided insights into ways in which future studies will need to be modified.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Nielson and Gould (2007) remind us of the importance of giving back to the native community even as we conduct our research. There is a saying that “people do not care what you know; they want to know that you care.” This is especially important for field research with native communities.

Unlike positivist quantitative designs, many qualitative researchers tend to dive right into data collection without benefit of an exploratory study or other pilot study. With this paper, we hope to share with the research community lessons from: (1) *an image-based* methodology adapted from a community strategic planning process and applied to an exploratory study of one Native American tribe’s reaction to cultural images and ICT’s, and (2) the many benefits of this pilot study in advance of a larger qualitative research design, including opportunities for discourse around ICT’s in relation to local culture and research methods.

While it is common for interview guides (sets of structured or semi-structured questions) to be pretested, the reality is that many researchers simply assume that their research design is a good one, because it models approved case study, ethnography, or another type of methodology, and because it was passed by the IRB of their respective institutions. Some young researchers fear that they will be wasting time, data or a potential participant by doing a pilot study when they do not see how the data could be included in the full study.

As researchers, we also often think that because we use accepted protocol for data collection or analysis that we will get the right answers, perhaps missing the idea that we may be asking the wrong questions. Too often, we leave reflections on the limitations of our research methods to the end of our papers or dissertations, encouraging others with suggestions for future designs or studies. While not all qualitative “designs” may seem suitable for a pilot study, most are certainly amenable

to pretesting of all the instruments or techniques for data collection and to a trial analysis of the qualitative data. This allows us to see if we are, in fact, getting data that will address the research questions or if our design and methods need to be revisited.

As an example, while we had planned to include interviews and formal discourse in the larger study to follow, and were sensitive to potential generational differences, we under-valued the shared cultural expressions of the often matriarchal, extended Choctaw family unit. Instead of focusing on individually based research, we now realize that our design may need to incorporate family groups. In terms of the visual methods, we also see new opportunities to test purely visual presentations and those with added narration (consistent with oral tradition).

More significantly, however, pilot studies are information opportunities for discourse about the research topic and methodology. Our pre-testing of the "dot-sticking" and card questions resulted in our adding "blood quotient". For all our reading, experience with the Choctaw, and prior research, we had not considered how this might influence cultural interpretation (such as perceived value or meaning of an artifact or image). Showing respect for the knowledge of participants should not be new to researchers, however, we tend to try to remain in control of the study. In previous studies covering a wide range of research topics, we have found one of the best closing questions to be, "Is there any question that you think we should have asked you that we have not?" While this might surprise the interviewee, this question has often generated important data about both the research topic and the research design or instruments.

In terms of the visual methodology, the use of images that were provided by members of the tribal community were more effective in opening up dialogue about Choctaw culture and ICT's than any interview guide or researcher provided images would have been. The process of creating a visual venue for discussion about "most Choctaw" versus "least Choctaw" also provided those who participated with a focus for their reflections. This is consistent with other findings on the role of visual methods (King, 2008; Wang and Burris, 1997).

In summary, the benefits of the exploratory study using a visual methodology included: (1) opening up a research agenda to new ideas or perspectives, (2) new insights for research design, as well as future studies, (3) the building of relationships including opening doors to the site, (participant volunteers, building rapport, and the "emic perspective"). The other lessons shared in this paper show the value for qualitative and mixed-method researchers of the rarely explored role of "pilot studies" as a formal part of qualitative research designs.

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## Appendices

### APPENDIX A

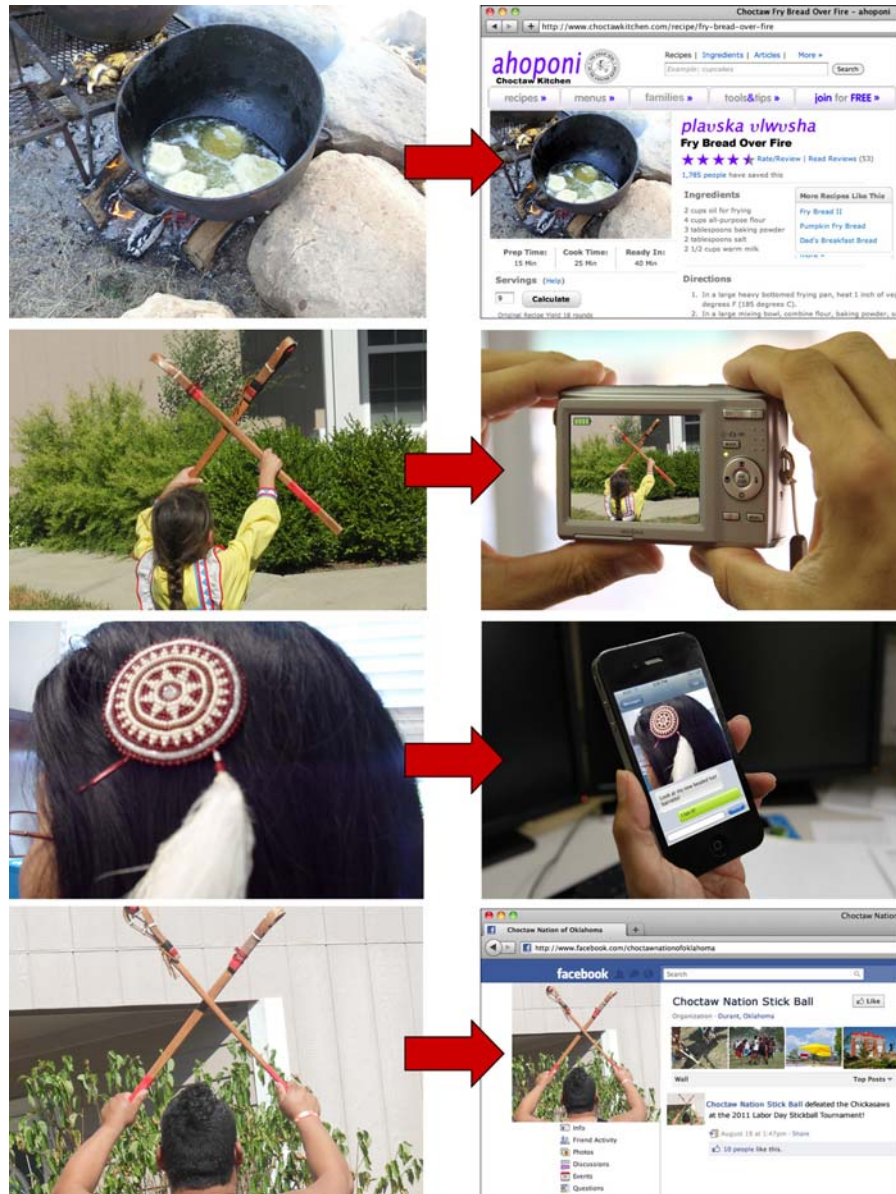


Figure 2. The four photographs that were altered to be the technology “ringers”



APPENDIX B



Figure 3. The images on the whiteboard with participants' dots affixed

APPENDIX C

1. Stick these 3 green dots ••• on or next to 3 photos you think are the most "Choctaw".

2. Stick the 1 red dot • on or next to a photo you think is the least "Choctaw".

3. Fill out this card. Choctaw Blood Quantum (1/4, 3/16, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Age 59 Gender M F City and State Darwin, LA  
 Why did you pick these photos? (optional) Chahta miyo  
ahli atuk e, make atukdo  
ji tuke more space on the back.

4. Place this card in the box below. Thank you!

Figure 4. A sample participant's survey card