Photovoice: A participatory action research tool

A guide for use

What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory action research method used to document, illustrate, express and share a topic of concern trough imagery. It is described as a creative process of empowerment in which people, often those who are under-represented, disadvantaged, with limited power in society, can share their lived experiences through photos or videos. Providing explanations or captions for the visual materials they produce helps participants to explain their world to others. Through sharing the imagery with various stakeholders, including policy-makers, government and the community forums, photovoice can be an awareness raising method about a specific issue, employed to bring about change.

Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris are credited with the first photovoice project in 1992 based on the work of Paulo Freire. In this project, Chinese women villagers used photography to represent their daily health and employment. Since then, many photovoice projects have been conducted about societal issues such as food security, poverty reduction, and child sexual exploitation (Wang, 1999).

Key concepts about photovoice

- ❖ Imagery can be a powerful tool to convey one's 'lived experience'
- ❖ Images teach: the photos you take reflect what is important to you about the topic that you want to share or inform others; imagery enables us to perceive the world around us in multiple ways; one image can be interpreted in different ways by different people
- ❖ Pictures can influence policy and practice in many social contexts
- ❖ The process requires that from the beginning, planners bring key stakeholders 'to the table' to serve as an audience
- ❖ Photovoice emphasizes and can facilitate individual and community action
- ❖ 'Doing' photovoice in real time exemplifies the *action* of the participatory action research process (Wang, 1999; http://ctb.ku.edu)

The photovoice process

- ☐ Select a topic as the focus for your photovoice project
- ☐ Take as many pictures related to your topic as you like
- ☐ Write notes as you take your photos: Why did you take each picture? What does it represent?
- ☐ Many photovoice projects ask participants to chose a smaller number of photos to best express their experience (e.g. 5-10)
- ☐ For each selected picture, write a narrative that explains why you took the photo and the message that each photograph conveys
- ☐ Compile the photos and narrative for sharing, presentation and discussion
- ☐ Debrief the process, outcomes and objectives: What would you do differently next time?

Photovoice

Learn about Photovoice
Take photos
Discuss photos & reflect on experience
Record narratives
Choose photos   for sharing
Invite people   to discussion
Present &   share
Reflect & move forward

OA-INVOLVE: Adapted from L.S. Lorenz 2005

Tips for a successful photovoice project

- Anyone with a camera can do a photovoice project. Photographic experience is not required.
- Pictures can be black and white, color or a combination of these.
- Think about who might view your photos and what messages about your topic you want to convey?
- Ensure your safety while taking pictures (e.g. to avoid falls).
- Avoid taking photos of individuals of small groups who might expect privacy even in public spaces (unless you get their consent to take the photo); see below the *Ethical considerations in photovoice.*
- Take photos using different angles, lighting to reflect different viewpoints.
- Note captions of your selected pictures as you take them to add to them later.

Ethical considerations in photovoice

There are no hard and fast rules about what you can and cannot photograph in a photovoice project. *However*, attention to two key aspects is important: 1) Respect for the privacy of other people and 2) Concern for the safety of the photographer.

Respect for the privacy of other people: Taking photographs as part of a photovoice project
Taking photographs, which do not contain people is not problematic, *unless* taking those

photographs is disruptive of the people in the setting.

Taking photographs of people in locations where they are not individualised or recognisable in the photograph and might expect that photographs are being taken should also not constitute a problem. An example of this would be a photograph of a street scene, a room full of people listening to a presentation, having lunch or walking around in the hotel foyer. If photographing people, photographers must fully understand the notion of

individual privacy (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) and the process of gaining informed consent. When photographing small groups of people (e.g., having a drink or an academic discussion) then it is best to ask their permission, explaining *why you are taking the photograph and what you will do with it.* This constitutes gaining informed consent. Gaining verbal consent is the most common way to do this. If anyone objects, then do not take the photograph. If the photographer is making individual 'portraits', i.e. of specific people doing things, then it is best to get their verbal informed consent to ensure that their privacy (while present in a public space) has not been invaded by the photographer. Even if not required by ethics protocol (e.g. when the photographs will not be used for research or posted for public display) it is courteous and to ask permission.

Sensitive issues, like photographing minors, disregarding personal dignity, photographs of illegal activities or photographs that portray individuals in a negative way must all be handled ethically. If in doubt, do not take the photograph; find another way to visually represent the issue you want to capture.

Protection of individual privacy also extends to one's private space and property, e.g. a photograph of someone's hotel room, inside their home or of their car might need this type of consideration.

Finally, it is important to assure people that the photographs are not being taken for commercial gain but for representing your experience in the photovioce project.

Concern for the safety of the photographer in photovoice

Photographers must remember that their own safety and well-being are vital and they must take extra care to maintain their own safety and the safety of others. It is recommended to address possible risks before photovoice begins, including physical harm (do not stand on a chair to get the 'best' photographic angle!!) and loss of privacy that may result from participation in the photovoice project (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Images can be understood regardless of language, culture, or other factors.

(http://ctb.ku.edu)

Photography provides a means for empowerment without requiring people to stand up and speak in public.

(http://ctb.ku.edu)

Photovoice can be used as a qualitative research method, an assessment tool, a data-gathering tool and as an evaluation tool.

(http://ctb.ku.edu)

Suggested resources

http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main. Implementing Photovoice in Your Community.

Evans-Agnew R.A. and Rosemberg M-A.S. (2016). Questioning Photovoice Research: Whose Voice? Qualitative Health Research , 26(8): 1019–1030.

Freire P. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York, NY, The Seabury Press, 1970.

Photovoice Facilitators' Guide http://www.lslorenz.com/papers/Photovoice_Facilitators_Guide.pdf

Wang C. (n.d.) http://people.umass.edu/afeldman/Photovoice.htm

Wang C. and Burris M.A. (1994) Empowerment through Photovoice: Portraits of Participation. Health Education Quarterly, 21(2): 171-186

Wang C.C., Yuan Y.L., and Feng M.L. (1996). Photovoice as a tool for participatory evaluation: The community's view of process and impact. Journal of Contemporary Health 4: 47-49.

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