

Introduction

1

A photo exhibit in a local government center shows photographs of a community in disarray. Evidence of safety issues, violence, and no place to exercise. The mayor gets the message that a community center that once was thriving in this community, must be rebuilt.

A group of transgender women stand proudly next to their photos showing the triumphs of their transitions, their stories of strength in an otherwise transphobic society. The greater community sees the importance of their visibility, the need to be inclusive to transgender people.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

In this book, *Photovoice for Social Justice*, we detail and illustrate the method's ideal use for understanding and eliminating health and social inequities and promoting social justice. The practical foundation and the scholarly purpose of our book is to guide social justice researchers and practitioners on the use of photovoice. Research methods that deeply explore community member's lived experiences with how they are treated by society are ideal in addressing social inequalities. Qualitative methods, in particular, are most useful in this (Patton,

2015) and we will focus on a step-by-step process of how to conduct qualitative, photovoice studies. As we write this book in the spring of 2020, the deeply rooted social and racial inequities across the United States are being brought to light to the general public as never before. We are seeing disparate, unjust outcomes from COVID-19 and the long-overdue uprising in reaction to ongoing police brutality and unjust murder primarily targeting Black people. It is our hope and intent that this book serve as a tool for a wide array of professionals to confidently move forward in using photovoice as one method in the renewed fight for racial and social justice for all.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF PHOTOVOICE

If it is true that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” then photovoice is a method beyond comparison. The mileage we get from photos illustrating the lived experiences of people goes beyond numbers and data typically used in health and social research. When accompanied by the dialogue and words of people who participate in photovoice, the method produces data with potential for use as a powerful advocacy tool to promote social justice.

The major underpinning of photovoice is that it is a participatory research method, one that utilizes feminist theory, Freirean approaches, and a constructivist paradigm toward research (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996). What this means is photovoice is an ideal method for uncovering the lived experiences among communities and people who may not otherwise have a voice in traditional (positivist) research methods and approaches. Not only is photovoice participatory, but also it is a way to have people express aspects of their lives in ways that go beyond words and numbers, by bringing in visual day-to-day experiences.

Photovoice as a participatory action-oriented research method: (a) considers the research participants as coresearchers (the participatory part) and (b) has as its purpose translating the results into action, such as a new or revised policy or a health promotion program (Wang & Burris, 1997). The point of view, then, is that a participatory method

like photovoice that redefines research participants as *coresearchers* as well as captures their lived experience is the ideal way to uncover what the precursors are to social and cultural inequities. With the information gleaned from photovoice, action-oriented and community-based researchers can translate the results into programs or policies that will help eliminate inequities to increase social justice. Photovoice may or may not uncover new information during the course of a project; however, its critical contribution is that it offers new perspectives and ways of understanding community issues directly from communities or populations.

At the time of writing this book, a quick literature search reveals nearly 3,800 journal articles mentioning photovoice have been published across journals from a multitude of disciplines including political science, youth services, social work, education, international development, and public health. This includes photovoice studies uncovering and illustrating all kinds of issues related to health and social justice (Breny & Lombardi, 2017; Carnahan, 2006; Castleden, Garvin, & First Nation, 2008; Findholt, Michael, & Davis, 2011; Genoe & Dupuis, 2013; Keller, Fleury, Perez, Ainsworth, & Vaughan, 2008; Madden & Breny, 2016; Mamary, McCright, & Roe, 2007; Martin, Garcia, & Leipert, 2010; McMorrow & Saksena, 2017; McMorrow & Smith, 2016; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1996). The list of social experiences that could potentially be explored using photovoice is seemingly endless and includes critical topics facing society today such as racial injustice, violence, homelessness, healthcare access, education, experiences of sex workers, experiences of refugees and other immigrants, and more.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Photovoice

Drs. Caroline Wang and Marianne Burris are often noted as the pioneers of the method we now call photovoice. Their groundbreaking work occurred in the context of international development work with Chinese migrant women and brought a new era of using photography and the visual image as research data (Wang et al., 1996). The method as they conceptualized it is rooted in three theoretical foundations: (a) documentary photography, (b) Paulo Freire's theory and practice of critical consciousness and empowerment education (Freire, 1970),

and (c) feminist theory. Understanding these conceptual frameworks is important for users of photovoice to grasp the great potential of the method to give voice to those who traditionally have not been heard.

Documentary Photography

The power of documentary photography is that it shows history and experiences through visual means. However, the power and ownership of the photographs remain with the photographer, despite who is being photographed. Photovoice, on the other hand, seeks to rebalance power to the photographer/research participants, hence putting “cameras directly into the hands of people who otherwise would not have access, and allows them to be recorders and potential catalysts, in their own communities” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 174). In this way, the research participants are photographers, interpreters, and participants all combined into one.¹

Empowerment Education

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher with lived experience of poverty and hunger that deeply informed his teaching methods. He utilized problem-based pedagogy, which involved learning through dialogue between farmworkers facilitated through using pictures as triggers for conversation starters (also called codes). These codes and subsequent dialogue not only helped the farmworkers learn Portuguese but also increased their personal empowerment. Through dialogues about farm life, they realized their place in society and that there was room for change—resulting in their critical awareness or consciousness of their ability to make change (Freire, 1970). “The pedagogy is problem-based and contextual: the knowledge that results is practical and directed towards action” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 172). This critical consciousness is the ideal aim of photovoice to achieve through putting coresearchers in control of what, when, and how they choose to take photos and also through dialoguing with pictures through a focus group style discussion.

¹In this book, we refrain from using the term *subject* and will refer to people working in photovoice projects as either *research participants* or *coresearchers*.

Feminist Theory and Research

Feminist approaches to research and epistemology are similar to Freirean approaches to education in that they are intended to facilitate critical consciousness, to empower the research participants, and to aim to change policy. “As empowerment education has challenged traditional approaches to schooling, so have feminist critiques of positivist research methods and the construction of knowledge pushed new aims and methods of inquiry” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 175). One of the many ways that photovoice actualizes a feminist approach is through what Campbell and Wasco (2000) referred to as “reducing hierarchical relationships.” Though a hierarchy exists with photovoice and there are still power imbalances between the researcher and the participants, the method explicitly seeks to reduce and minimize this hierarchy.

In sum, these three approaches/underlying theoretical concepts of documentary photography, empowerment education, and feminist theory are the basis of the photovoice method. They drive us to uncover the many truths in people’s lived experiences: truths that need to be told by communities and heard by policymakers, change agents, and others in power—indeed, truths that are often best shown through visual means and with a goal of critical consciousness and change.

PHOTOVOICE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is often applied as a vague and undefined term as many academics and practitioners committed to social justice tend to assume that others know what it means. Consequently, there are a variety of definitions that change slightly depending on the profession or academic discipline that is asked to define social justice. Therefore, for the purpose of this book, it is important to have a common, working definition. We love the definition offered by the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership (2020), which is:

Social justice recognizes the inherent dignity of all people and valuing every life equally. Social justice calls for both personal reflection and social change to ensure that each of us has the right and the opportunity to thrive in our communities,

regardless of our identities. Those who strive for social justice believe in the triumph of our shared humanity.

Using this definition and considering the aforementioned description of photovoice, we can see that photovoice is inherently a method that lends itself as a tool for working toward social justice.

Photovoice is considered a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method, which means it is grounded in the philosophy that working collaboratively with communities on research as opposed to the traditional researcher-led approach results in steps needed for action (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). CBPR has been defined as:

A collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community and has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change. ... (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998)

Thus, when researchers and practitioners choose photovoice as a method and commit to authentic engagement through CBPR, there is additional potential for social justice outcomes related to the *process* of engaging in photovoice. For example, a photovoice project can intentionally build skills such as photography, organization, and communication that empower participants as part of the implementation process of the study and contribute, at least in part, to the ability of participants to lead change in the community.

The three original goals of photovoice as articulated by Wang and Burris (1997) also link to social justice. They are to: (a) enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (b) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (c) reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). Although not all photovoice projects reach the stage of engaging policymakers, this is an important goal to keep in mind as an ultimate means of impacting social justice. For example, if a photovoice project engages people who are homeless in a particular city and their stories are shared with the local city council, then this may result in a city policy change that leads to more equitable

economic or mental health treatment opportunities for the project population.

CONCLUSION

Photovoice is a research method that transcends academic disciplines. It can be an essential tool for both academics and community practitioners to uncover action areas for social justice by prioritizing the worldviews and stories of community members from their own lens and in their own words. In Chapter 2, we turn toward the first steps of planning for a photovoice study. This includes ethical considerations, an overview of institutional review boards (IRB), unique considerations for navigating an IRB with a photovoice study, and a case study for enhanced understanding of the concepts we cover in Chapter 2.