



Using Photovoice as a Participatory Assessment and Issue Selection Tool

*A Case Study with the Homeless
in Ann Arbor*

Caroline C. Wang

Photovoice is an innovative participatory tool based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community based approach to documentary photography. Defined as “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369), it involves providing community people with cameras so that they can photograph their everyday health and work realities. Photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers and others who can be mobilized for change. It codifies the goals of involving community members in taking

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pictures, telling stories, and informing policymakers about issues of concern at the grassroots level (Wang & Burris, 1994).

This chapter focuses primarily on the use of photovoice as a participatory assessment tool that enables people to identify community strengths or assets and their shared concerns as a basis for issue selection and action. Following an overview of the background and conceptual framework of photovoice, the advantages of this approach to community assessment are explained. The chapter then describes the Language of Light Photovoice project, which was designed to create opportunities for men and women living at a shelter in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to conduct their own community assessment as a first step in an ongoing community based participatory research (CBPR) process (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000).

As in many other communities, the homeless people in Washtenaw County are a highly stigmatized group with minimal access to the media or to the policymakers whose decisions influence their lives. As this case study suggests, by photographing their everyday health, work, and life conditions, homeless participants were able to document their struggles and strengths and to promote critical dialogue through group discussion about their photographs. This participatory assessment and issue selection process in turn helped position them to reach policymakers and the broader public about their concerns.

PHOTOVOICE BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The photovoice concept, method, and use for community based participatory research were first developed and applied by Wang and colleagues in the Ford Foundation-supported Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program in Yunnan, China (Wu et al., 1995). Photovoice adheres to basic health promotion principles by involving people at the grassroots level in community action as stated in the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (World Health Organization, 1986).

Theoretical underpinnings of photovoice and its application as an effective technique for conducting community assessment and participatory evaluation, reaching policymakers, and carrying out participatory health promotion have been described in a series of research articles (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Wang, Wu, Zhan, & Carovano, 1998; Wang, Yuan, & Feng, 1996). Photovoice has been used in a variety of settings and with diverse populations, including neighborhood groups in Contra Costa County, California (Spears, 1999); community residents in Flint, Michigan (Vanucci, 1999; Vaughn, 1998; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Bell, Hutchison, & Powers, 2000); people with mental illness in New Haven, Connecticut (Bowers, 1999); Planned

Parenthood youth peer educators in Cape Town, South Africa (Moss, 1999a, 1999b); young, homeless women and older, marginally housed women in Detroit (Killion & Wang, 2000); teenage "town criers" on AIDS in the San Francisco Bay Area (May, 2001); and a "community of identity" comprised of tuberculosis patients, community health advisers, and health care professionals (Butler & Xet-Mull, 2001). An overview of the approach and its uses may be found on the Web at <http://www.photovoice.com>.

Photovoice integrates Paulo Freire's (1970) approach to critical education, feminist theory, and a participatory approach to documentary photography. As discussed in Chapter Two, Freire's educational praxis stresses the importance of people's sharing and speaking from their own experience. It further emphasizes people identifying historical and social patterns binding their individual lives, creating an analytical perspective from which to relate their situations to root causes, and developing solutions and strategies for change (Freire, 1970; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Freire placed great emphasis on the power of the visual image as a means to helping individuals think critically about the forces and factors influencing their lives (Freire, 1970). Photovoice builds on a commitment to social and intellectual change through community members' critical production and analysis of the visual image. Feminist theory suggests that power accrues to those who have voice, set language, make history, and participate in decisions (Smith, 1987). One application of feminist theory to photovoice practice is that participants may wield this approach to influence how their public presence is defined. As a methodology, photovoice represents one attempt to enable participants to help disrupt and ultimately revise depictions that contribute to gender, class, ethnic, and other kinds of oppression. Finally, participatory approaches to documentary photography developed by Wendy Ewald (1985), Jim Hubbard (1991), Jo Spence (1995), and other activist photographers suggest a grassroots approach to representation and demonstrate ways in which women, children, homeless youth, and others can effectively use photography as a personal voice. The photovoice methodology attempts to blend the principle of photography as personal voice with the politics of photography as community voice in order to reach policymakers.

The photovoice concept is designed to enable people to produce and discuss photographs as a means of catalyzing personal and community change. Using cameras, participants document the reality of their lives. By sharing and talking about their photographs, they use the power of the visual image to communicate their life experiences and perceptions. As they engage in a group process of critical reflection, participants may discuss individual change, community quality of life, and policy issues (Wallerstein, 1987). The immediacy of the visual image creates evidence and promotes a vivid participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF PHOTOVOICE TO COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

Chapters Seven and Eight reviewed various community assessment tools and techniques that may be useful in community based participatory research (see also Green & Kreuter, 1991; Israel, Cummings, Dignan, Heaney, & Perales, 1995; Minkler, 1997; Sharpe, Greany, Lee, & Royce, 2000). Several advantages of the photovoice method illustrate how it is distinct from other community assessment and evaluation methods (such as community inventory, community assessment, or formative or process evaluation) (Wang & Burris, 1997). These advantages are summarized here in terms of their contribution to program implementation and sustainability, the assessment process, and equity and community building.

Photovoice offers new approaches for programs, providing a Freirian perspective of "problem-posing education" that allows participants to help define issues and frame the most relevant social actions. Beyond the conventional role of needs assessment, photovoice enables participants to become advocates for their own well-being and that of their community. More than a method of assessment, this is a tool to reach, inform, and organize community members, enabling them to prioritize their concerns and discuss problems and solutions. The method can also sustain community participation during the period between needs assessment and program implementation. The camera is an unusually motivating and appealing device for many people, and photovoice provides a source of community pride and ownership. Furthermore, photovoice provides a way to reaffirm or redefine program goals during the periods when community needs are being assessed. Wang and Burris (1997) noted that in Yunnan, the village women were often asked by friends and neighbors why they were taking pictures. Their explanations served to focus attention on women's status and health, to teach the community about the goals of the project, and to solicit people's feedback about the process.

Photovoice provides powerful assessment opportunities for health researchers and practitioners engaged in community based participatory research. As John Gaventa (1993) has noted, the participatory process assumes the legitimacy of popular knowledge produced outside a formal scientific structure. Photovoice prioritizes the knowledge put forth by people as a vital source of expertise, giving participants "the possibility of perceiving their world from the viewpoint of the people who live lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world" (Ruby, 1991, p. 50). As an approach to participatory needs assessment or participatory appraisal, this method confronts a fundamental disparity between what researchers think is important and what the community thinks is important. With its powerful use of visual images to

capture and reflect a community context, photovoice satisfies the "descriptive mandate" of needs assessment (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice also contributes to assessment by the sampling of different social and behavioral settings. People with cameras can record settings or interactions not available to health professionals or researchers. Photovoice enables participants to bring the explanations, ideas, or stories of other community members to the assessment process. In this way, it affords a flexible, accessible means of incorporating a wide array of perspectives.

Photovoice offers a community- and equity-building component when used as a program or assessment methodology. By focusing on long-term community relationships, it provides tangible and immediate benefits to people and their networks. Returning photographs to neighbors and friends enables participants to express their appreciation, build ties, and pass along something of value created by themselves. This process can affirm the ingenuity and perspective of society's most vulnerable populations. Wang and Burris (1997) describe the success of photovoice with low-income women from Yunnan villages where education for females lacked parental and broader support. Photovoice is accessible to anyone who can learn to use an autofocus camera, whether or not he or she is able to read and write. Photographs collected using this method may serve to capture the full context of a community, its assets as well as its needs. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) note that the range of community experience includes capacities, collective efforts, informality, stories, celebration, and tragedy. In Yunnan, the village women photographed moments of loss and grief as well as those of celebration and strength, and they elicited stories about the community's imagination, resources, and capabilities (Wang & Burris, 1997). In contrast, conventional methods of needs assessment, such as interviews or questionnaires, may inadvertently reinforce a sense of impotence, inferiority, and resentment. The breadth and depth of public health problems suggests that photovoice can provide a creative approach to enables participants to identify, define, and enhance their community according to their own priorities.

The next section presents a case study illustrating the use of photovoice as a method of participatory community assessment as well as participatory evaluation (Wang, Yuan, & Feng, 1996).

The Language of Light Photovoice project was initiated in Ann Arbor, Michigan, by Lisa Powers, at the time a board member of the Shelter Association of Washtenaw County, Michigan. A professional photographer, she felt she knew relatively little about the people whom she was representing and contacted me to collaborate on a photovoice project. Men and women living at the shelter in Washtenaw County used photovoice as a tool for participatory assessment and to depict issues concerning homeless people. Their photographs and explanations would also be used in a structured evaluation of the effectiveness of the project.

PHOTOVOICE AND THE LANGUAGE OF LIGHT PROJECT

Public understanding of the plight of homelessness is important because public opinion can influence policies affecting homeless persons (Toro & McDonell, 1992). The Language of Light project was established to enable participants to counteract stereotypes about homeless people and to help shape public perceptions about important issues affecting them.

Several projects involving homeless people and self-expression served as forerunners to this effort. In New York City, Hope Sandrow founded the Artist and Homeless Collaborative, a place where artists create artwork with, rather than about, the women, teens, and children living in the city's homeless shelters. Together, they use art to speak out about the personal, social, and political issues that affect homeless people. Such projects have included the creation of an AIDS education poster; a poster addressing rape, abuse, and homelessness; and a writing project yielding a visual collage and exhibit of shelter residents' résumés (Wolper, 1995).

The Artist and Homeless Collaborative has promoted community health by seeking to practice art as an "operating theater in which the often polarized segments of a community come together to create something not seen before" (Wolper, 1995, p. 252). Sandrow also notes that their approach enables people in the shelter to regain what the shelter system and their life circumstances remove: "a sense of individual identity and confidence in human interaction" (p. 253).

Jim Hubbard, founder of Shooting Back, a project with offices in Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis, has taught photography and writing to homeless and Native American youth and engaged them in the process of "creating their own images of themselves and their realities" (Hubbard, 1991, 1994). At an urban drop-in center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Women Speak writing project explored the use of writing by homeless women to enhance their self-expression and self-esteem; clinicians reported its value in helping them rethink their relationships with community people (Wolf, Goldfader, & Lehan, 1997).

Finally, the celebrated photographer-educator Wendy Ewald, collaborating with the Self-Employed Women's Association, worked with village children in Vichya, India, to use photography and writing to document their lives (Ewald, 1996). All of these projects focus on the creative process of using photography to help promote a sense of well-being in marginalized communities.

Language of Light built on these successful projects with a firm commitment to the photovoice method of assessment and evaluation. The project had three primary goals: first, to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns; second, to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion

of photographs; and third, to enable participants to reach policymakers. Major project phases included training the trainers, recruiting participants, conducting workshops, and sharing information with policymakers, journalists, and the broader community.

Training the Trainers and Facilitators

Training of my cofacilitators Lisa Powers and then-public health graduate student Jennifer Cash included providing a full description of the program goals, the theoretical underpinnings of the project, ethical concerns, and photovoice methodology. In addition, they were familiarized with the basics of group process and camera instruction. Although our team did not have prior experience working directly with homeless people, we each had community organizing and advocacy experience.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited at the city's shelters through contact with project facilitators and distribution of flyers. Facilitators welcomed all shelter residents to participate. Eight men and three women volunteered, for which they received a stipend of \$20 per session. The men ranged in age from twenty-four to fifty-five years, the women from eighteen to sixty-one. The eleven participants included six white Americans, three African Americans, one Asian American, and one Hispanic American.

Design of the Workshops

Over a one-month period, participants attended three four-hour workshops at one of the city's day shelters, with separate workshops held for men and women. This time frame facilitated maintaining contact with and generating enthusiasm among participants who lead itinerant lives.

The first workshop began with a discussion of cameras, ethics, and power; an introduction to the photovoice concept, method, and goals; careful review of a written informed consent form; camera instruction and self-portraits; a guided photo shoot around the downtown area; and wrap-up and evaluation. Our discussion focused on participants' safety, the camera as a tool conferring authority as well as responsibility, ways to approach people when taking their picture, and giving photographs back to people to express appreciation and build ties. Questions included "What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take his or her picture?" "Should someone take pictures of other people without their knowledge?" "What kind of responsibility does carrying a camera confer?" and "What would you *not* want to be photographed doing?" We also explained that for each roll of film taken by participants, we would provide them with an "acknowledgment and release" form. This form asked participants to obtain the signed permission of each identifiable person photographed, to allow that such

images be shared publicly at a future time (see Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001, for a more detailed discussion of these and other ethical issues and applications).

Procedure

During the introduction to the photovoice concept and method, participants looked at images of downtown Ann Arbor taken by facilitator Powers. In each photograph, participants were able to identify every landmark, alley, and building; provide historical information about each location; and recount recent events that had taken place there. Both facilitators and participants noted the depth and breadth of participants' knowledge of the community.

Participants learned to load reusable Holga cameras. We selected the Holga camera for its simple design and operation, its affordability (\$20 per camera), and its appealing and creative format. In this way, participants were provided with something of value that could also be replaced if lost or stolen. One distinguishing feature of the Holga camera is that it permits double and multiple exposures of images, thus allowing the photographer to literally layer meanings. Participants used black-and-white film, which is particularly well suited to the Holga's softer focus and its multiple-exposure feature.

After learning how to load and advance film, participants walked around town together in a guided photo shoot. Facilitators encouraged participants to experiment with angles, reflections, and shadows. At their first session, each participant exposed a full roll of film, learned how to load and unload the film, and discussed the experience of using the camera. This first guided photo shoot enabled participants to see and discuss their first pictures at the very next session.

In the second and subsequent sessions, participants took several more rolls of photographs individually or in small groups formed on their own initiative. They examined photographic contact sheets of each of their images from previous sessions. They also received enlarged prints of images that they felt were most significant or attractive. Some participants performed writing exercises about their photos, following a method that is captured by the mnemonic *SHOWED* (Shaffer, 1983):

What do you *See* here?

What's really *Happening* here?

How does this relate to *Our* lives?

Why does this problem, concern, or strength *Exist*?

What can we *Do* about it?

Regardless of what they wrote, we invited participants to discuss their photographs in an audiotaped interview. During these discussions, held in a group format, participants described and analyzed the content and context of their

photographs. They gave affirming feedback to one another about their images. These discussions helped prepare participants for subsequent public display of their work at a theater. Each participant was provided with a three-ring binder with clear plastic sleeves in which to store their negatives, contact sheets, and enlarged photographs for safekeeping.

Sharing Information with Policymakers, Journalists, and the Broader Community

With participants' approval, and with the understanding that their participation was voluntary, we arranged public forums in which participants could convey their perspectives to community leaders and the public. Participants selected the photographs that they felt were most interesting or attractive and wrote descriptive captions for a series of articles that appeared in local newspapers, in a gallery exhibition, and in a major public forum.

Facilitator Powers, an established local resident, gained a central gallery's invitation to hold an exhibition, as well as free use of the city's largest theater and pro bono union labor for the public forum. She drew on her longtime networks to arrange these local venues and garner community support. We found policymakers, such as city council members, notably responsive to letters and follow-up postcards inviting them to the public events. To gain media coverage, we contacted print and electronic media by mail and by phone. We especially sought out journalists who covered community and local interest beats, as these media representatives were likely to be particularly sensitive to the project outcomes.

Evaluation

The multimethod evaluation included carrying out ongoing formative evaluation throughout the project; surveying participants before and after each workshop; garnering feedback from participants using an open-ended, audiotaped interview; monitoring the extent and quality of media coverage of the project; and assessing audience attendance and feedback. The sample size of participants was too small for the pre- and postworkshop surveys to lend themselves to statistical analyses. Informed by the other evaluation approaches, however, the following discussion is framed by analyzing the extent to which the Language of Light photovoice project met its goals.

The first goal, to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, was achieved by participants, as evidenced by the range of photographs taken and stories told. A fifty-five-year-old man titled one image "Good Times but We're Not Feeling It." He took a picture of a clock and digital display on Main Street. He said, "Not only does it tell the time, but it also shows the Dow Jones as high as it has ever been. Why is the Dow Jones so high? Everyone's making a bundle of money on the stock market—but even though

many of us at the shelter have jobs, we can barely find a hamburger to eat sometimes." This participant later taught policymakers and others something that many did not know: it was not uncommon for a person living in the shelter to hold two or three jobs. People also photographed what gave them hope. A fifty-three-year-old man titled a photograph of a canoe in the water "Tranquility." He said, "I was trying to get the peacefulness of it. Water's always interested me, and I have a lot of respect for Mother Nature and the enjoyment of it. The appeal of water and the freedom to go into areas where I control the outcome."

The second goal was to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs. This goal was achieved as participants shared survival skills necessary for living at the shelter and critiqued stereotypes that they felt attached to themselves and other homeless people. Photovoice facilitators had anticipated that participants might focus attention on the major homeless policy issue being debated, that of moving the shelter out of the city to a remote area near the city dump, and perhaps even wish to mobilize around it. Unexpectedly, they gave minimal attention in their photographs and discussions to this topic. An important aspect of how participants defined this second goal was their ability to increase project facilitators' knowledge about the difficulties of their everyday lives on their own terms.

Discussion

In keeping with the goal of CBPR to balance research with action (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998), the Language of Light project sought to reach policymakers and other influential audiences. Barrow, Herman, Cordova, and Struening (1999) note that interventions should address not only the health conditions of the homeless but also the general phenomenon of homelessness itself and the societal problem of discrimination that influences it. Participants conveyed their perspectives to a broader audience in three ways. First, they snapped photographs and wrote descriptive text for newspaper articles. Second, their photographs and captions were exhibited locally at a downtown gallery, whose staff reported that it was the best-attended exhibit in the gallery's history. Finally, several hundred people, including policymakers, journalists, researchers, public health graduate students, and the public, attended an exhibit at the city's largest theater where photovoice participants showed their slides with accompanying narrations and spoke to an audience of present and future community leaders. Three newspapers and cable television covered the event.

This photovoice project was conducted at a time when homeless advocates observed that constructing a new 120-bed shelter on the outskirts of the city was "designed to placate downtown merchants" at the expense of homeless people (Hall, 1997). At that particular moment, the city was considering an

investment of \$3 million in the proposed new facility, which would have made it extremely difficult for shelter users to travel on foot or by bus to their workplaces or other sites of health care, education, and social services. Although the Language of Light project did not substantively alter these plans, it enabled board members, planners, community residents, and community leaders to rethink issues from the perspective of the homeless.

An unstated goal of the project was to help participants adhere to the shelter's sixty-day limit and find permanent shelter without having to ask for an extension. Such extensions had been requested by approximately 75 percent of shelter users. However, within three months of initiating this project, ten of the eleven participants had left the shelter and moved into their own housing. While it is difficult to determine whether the participants represented a skewed sample, in the sense of being more likely to succeed in finding new housing, their success in meeting this unspoken goal was striking. Shelter residents who volunteered for the photovoice workshop may have been especially motivated to explore new strategies to improve their lives or find a way to leave the shelter as quickly as possible. For example, one eighteen-year-old participant had just arrived at the shelter from another state the previous day; despite her personal suffering, she displayed a relentlessly positive attitude and the ability to encourage others.

Participants appear to have benefited from their photovoice involvement in a number of ways. Women and men alike noted that their participation enhanced their self-esteem, peer status, and quality of life by providing an opportunity to creatively express their perspectives and define their concerns in a manner that garnered the attention of media, policymakers, researchers, and the broader society of which they are a part. For example, one fifty-year-old man stated that had he not participated in photovoice, he would have "just been laying around the shelter watching television." He noted that many shelter users were intelligent people seeking to be engaged and stimulated by training such as that provided by Language of Light Photovoice. The eighteen-year-old woman described the project as "awesome" because her participation made her feel important and useful: "I was busy, and that was such a wonderful feeling, and my feeling of esteem went way up." One sixty-one-year-old woman held up her camera and said, "This is history!" She felt that photovoice gave her the opportunity to define her life as she, not outsiders, understood it. Several participants noted that the photovoice project enabled them to view their surroundings in a deliberate fashion, to observe their environment with new curiosity, and to imagine the world from another person's point of view. One participant also said that the process of keeping track of his camera, his unexposed and exposed rolls of film, and his photographs helped him think in a parallel way about how he organized other aspects of his life.

Despite their own extraordinary hardships, the people who participated in the photovoice project had the drive and strength to come to regular sessions.

No one dropped out during the course of the project. One member who found a new job was unable to attend some scheduled sessions; in his place he sent a friend recruited from the shelter. During group discussions, people sometimes described painful experiences, of which they had had more than their share. Facilitators and participants conveyed empathy and support. For both groups, women's and men's, the extent to which the individual's sharing of a difficult life story served as a traumatic or a therapeutic experience—for the individual and for the group—depended on the group's listening skills as well as compassion. Participants tended to close ranks in support of one another if someone shared a debilitating or sad experience.

Outside the photovoice sessions, participants could be seen walking around town together in groups of two to four people. Participating in this project itself enabled participants to get to know one another, build ties and friendships, and therefore bond as a peer support group for problem solving and teamwork. It enabled homeless people to speak from their experience and talk about what mattered to them so that they could help one another survive. The project gave people the opportunity to find solutions together—sometimes simple but important ones—getting to trust one another and then being able to literally borrow the shirt off another person's back for a job interview. Such occurrences appear to illustrate Thoits's finding (1986) that the most effective social support is not likely to be given by professionals but by people who socially resemble the support recipient and who can empathize with stressors based on personal experience.

An unexpected observation was that having a camera around one's neck suggested the luxury of expendable income. Facilitators and participants found that wearing the Holga enabled participants to "pass" as middle-class adults rather than homeless ones. They found that people were more likely to approach them, express curiosity about what they were doing ("Are you in a photography class?"), and strike up conversations ("Are you a photographer?" "Take our picture!"). Given the stigma and shame conferred on homeless people by our society, many participants found this experience more evocative and affirming than they expected and expressed this during each workshop.

Limitations

As illustrated in the Language of Light project, the photovoice approach has its weaknesses. First, we are not able to say whether the housing solutions found by participants have been long-lasting. William Breakey (1997) notes that for some people who lack housing, homelessness may be episodic, and their health profiles are similar to those of others living in poverty. Other people may move into and out of permanent housing in a cyclical pattern. We know that one participant who found an apartment still on occasion uses daytime shelter support services such as the lunch program; we do not know the remaining project participants' long-term housing outcomes. Like other researchers in this domain,

we are challenged to follow up with people who may lead essentially nomadic lives (Comover et al., 1997).

Second, the initial workshop stressed participants' safety, but any potential risks to participants in a photovoice project are magnified when the project involves society's most vulnerable members. During the course of the project, a shelter user with a serious mental illness hit one of the project participants in the face with a metal chair in what the latter described as a gay-bashing. We strove to minimize risks as much as possible and view the safety of participants as paramount but could not prevent every serious danger they may have faced daily.

Third, as indicated earlier, we did not ascertain the extent to which participants were representative of other homeless people in initiative, motivation, and resilience. One participant would say, "She has a bad attitude," to describe someone else in the shelter, a nonparticipant, whom she perceived as complaining, negative, and self-pitying. As participation in this photovoice project was voluntary, it may be that people who have the most difficult lives find the method impractical, unappealing, or inaccessible.

Fourth, as a general concern, a photovoice project might enable providers to achieve good public relations at the expense of other substantive approaches to prevent and solve homelessness. Paul Toro and his colleagues support examining how the introduction of a new service for homeless people may affect the ongoing pattern of existing or future services (Toro, Trickett, Wall, & Salem, 1991). Photovoice facilitators ought to appreciate the broader "principle of interdependence" that "alerts researchers, interventionists, and policy makers to attend to the full range of possible positive and negative consequences of their activities" (p. 1212).

Finally, the focus on participants' contribution to representing and enhancing their lives may be seen to be casting homelessness strictly in terms of personal responsibility, rather than broader community or social responsibility (Minkler, 1999). How personal and collective responsibility for homelessness, or any other public health issue, will be understood by the public through photovoice images and narratives ought to be critically discussed by project facilitators and participants.

IMPLICATIONS FOR USE OF PHOTOVOICE WITH VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Based on the Language of Light Photovoice project, two recommendations are offered to community based participatory researchers considering a photovoice project with people belonging to any of society's most vulnerable groups.

The first recommendation is to recruit at the very outset the policymakers and community leaders who can be mobilized to help implement the change recommended by photovoice participants (Wang, 1999). Participants' photographs and stories can reach policymakers and the broader society, perhaps even influencing healthful public policy, but how? The potential for practitioners' and participants' use of photovoice as a tool for community based health promotion dwells in the conversations and negotiations among participants, health workers, policymakers, journalists, and community leaders over the images of interest. Not by happenstance do these interactions occur. From the start of the Language of Light project, the team facilitators involved, wrote, and informed the mayor, city council members, journalists, and other community leaders. These people were chosen because they might serve as an influential audience for participants' images and stories and could help amplify the participants' insights.

The second recommendation is to be aware of, and find ways to minimize, participants' risks, including physical harm and loss of privacy to themselves or their community. Although researchers and practitioners engaged in CBPR cannot fully prevent all dangers to participants—particularly homeless people or other groups of society's most vulnerable members—they can minimize potential dangers to participants. Among the ways of doing so are (1) underscoring during group discussions the participants' responsibilities when carrying a camera to respect the privacy and rights of others, (2) facilitating critical dialogue that yields specific suggestions and ways to respect others' privacy and rights, and (3) emphasizing that no picture is worth taking if it brings the photographer or subject harm or ill will. As noted earlier, written consent was obtained from participants, and participants were asked to obtain written consent from any people they photographed. This requirement sometimes yielded stiff, less spontaneous pictures but prevented misunderstandings. It also built trust by giving participants an opportunity to describe the project and solicit the subjects' own insights about a community issue. Furthermore, it established the possibility of a long-term relationship that may allow for future photographs and exchange of knowledge, as well as the possibility of acquiring written consent to use the photographs for health promotion aims. Flint Photovoice, a large-scale project subsequent to Language of Light Photovoice, yielded further important ethical lessons and is elaborated upon by Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001).

The Language of Light project suggested that photovoice could make several important contributions to health promotion practice. These contributions synthesize the methodology's theoretical underpinnings: the critical production of knowledge and expertise that influence personal and community action, the accrual of power to those who participate in promoting their own and their community's health, and the analytical use of a community based approach to photography as personal voice.

Contributions to health promotion practice include, first, that health professionals can use photovoice as a tool to learn more about the people with whom they work, to build rapport and trust, and to create productive settings for group discussion and problem solving. The importance of these advantages is substantial; many health professionals learn the hard way that people in the community view them with skepticism, if not outright suspicion. Regardless of the community based participatory researcher's experience, skills, or commitment, he or she may initially be perceived as part of the problem—elitist; ignorant of people's everyday realities, priorities, and survival needs; and motivated by careerism (see Chapters Four, Five, and Six).

Second, important variations in the health needs of homeless people are often overlooked in health planning (Ensign & Santelli, 1997). Photovoice offers a vehicle for gaining needed contextual information for understanding the health status, behavior, needs, strengths, and concerns of homeless people.

Third, community based participatory researchers can use photovoice as a tool to map personal and community assets that can in turn facilitate issue selection and action (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Participants may find photovoice an ideal methodology for creatively documenting their environment and its resources. In doing so, they demonstrate their own ingenuity and imagination.

Fourth, participants may benefit from enhanced self-esteem and peer status as they are listened to—not talked at—and gain a sense of political efficacy (Zimmerman, 1989).

Fifth, sheltered homeless mothers had few social supports to buffer stress and improve well-being (Bassuk et al., 1996), suggesting the positive implications of social networks. Health promotion practitioners may find photovoice a creative and effective tool for fostering social support among participants.

Sixth, photovoice can bring willing, powerful members of a community together with highly stigmatized people and enable the former to assist the latter by first learning from them.

The women and men involved in the Language of Light project are similar to thousands of people who are homeless and looking for means to find adequate shelter, food, health care, education, employment, and dignity. Photovoice may create an opportunity for society's most vulnerable members to speak from their own experience and can change the quality of discussion among themselves and those who advocate their well-being.

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