Participatory action research and photovoice in a psychiatric nursing/clubhouse collaboration exploring recovery narrative

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Accessible summary

- Personal stories about recovery in mental health are important sources of knowledge.
- Research methods are needed for exploring personal stories of recovery which honour and empower the authors of recovery stories.
- The Clubhouse of Winnipeg and an assistant professor in psychiatric nursing piloted a research project using photography in order to explore, document and share Clubhouse Member stories of recovery.

Abstract

The Clubhouse of Winnipeg (a community psychosocial rehabilitation centre) collaborated with a psychiatric nursing assistant professor on a participatory action research (PAR) project exploring the concept of recovery using a research method called photovoice. The collaborative project – *Our Photos Our Voices* – demonstrates how PAR and photovoice are well suited for collaborative research in mental health which honours principles underlying consumer empowerment and recovery. The foundation of empowerment is the power to act on one’s behalf; PAR and photovoice support the full participation of concerned individuals in all aspects of research with the ultimate goal of action to solve problems or to meet goals identified by those individuals. Empowerment is also the ability to lay claim to one’s own truth. At the core of the recovery model is the principle that recovery is defined by the individual and based on individual determinations of meaningful goals and a meaningful life. The *Our Photos Our Voices* project uses PAR and photovoice to effectively access, explore, document and share personal, local knowledge about recovery grounded in the personal experience of the Clubhouse researchers.

Introduction

Researchers are challenged to find ways of working with mental health consumers which are empowering and which facilitate the development of personal and local knowledge about recovery. The empowerment recovery model in mental health is recognized as supportive to the recovery of meaningful productive lives for individuals experiencing mental illness (Anthony 1993, Kirby & Keon 2006). Kirby & Keon (2006) state that ‘recovery is understood a manifestation of personal empowerment’ (p. 61). An empowerment model of recovery promotes the capacity of the individual to define what recovery means personally and what constitutes a productive, meaningful life. The Kirby and Keon report, which lays the foundation for a mental health strategy of Canada, affirms the importance of ‘reclaiming one’s own story’ (p. 231) as a step towards personal empowerment and recovery. There is a developing literature on practical means for working collaboratively with individuals and consumer groups within an empowerment recovery framework using a research methodology called participatory action research.
(PAR) (Jacobson et al. 2005, de Wolff 2009, Mancini 2011). The Clubhouse of Winnipeg and a Brandon University assistant professor/psychiatric nurse piloted a PAR project using a method called photovoice as means for collaboratively exploring recovery through personal stories – Our Photos Our Voices. An Exploration of Recovery by the Clubhouse of Winnipeg. This paper argues that the methodology of PAR and the method photovoice are well suited to collaborative mental health research, and illustrates their effectiveness in accessing, exploring, documenting and sharing of personal and local knowledge about recovery.

The concepts of ‘cure’ and ‘recovery’ have been the territory of medical and health care professions who lay claim to truth about illness and recovery (Frank 1995, p. 5). The medical authority to define mental health recovery started to shift as early as the 1930s when ex-mental health patients began to organize in the ‘first incarnations of the self-help movement’ (Jacobson 2004, p. 44). By the 1980s, mental health self-help groups were using the concept of recovery and recovery stories to revise attitudes and knowledge about recovery from serious mental illness, a revision supported by ‘longitudinal research uncovering a more positive course for a significant number of patients with severe mental illness’ (United States Department of Health and Human Services 1999, chapter 2 para 3). Constructing and telling one’s story is critical in reclaiming the power to make meaning of one’s own illness experience and to envision recovery in one’s own terms. ‘Narrative is much more than simply the telling of stories. It is also a way of knowing and a way of creating community’ (Schneider 2010, p. 14). Illness and recovery stories help individuals know they are not alone and that there is hope. Stories are also important in rewriting social attitudes and beliefs about mental illness. The editors of Unfitting Stories. Narrative Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Trauma state that constructing and telling the story of one’s ill health or suffering can change the way the story teller thinks about herself, the way other’s see the story teller, and can help effect social change (Raoul et al. 2007, p. 25). Stories have the power to effect change.

When a Member of the Clubhouse of Winnipeg (a community psychosocial rehabilitation centre) suggested recovery as a Health and Wellness group discussion topic, the author (as facilitator of that group) wanted a means to discuss recovery based on the personal experience of Clubhouse Members. I wanted a means which elicited and documented personal recovery knowledge and which made that knowledge available to others within the Clubhouse and within other communities such as self-help organizations, hospital mental health units and mental health professionals. Stories are powerful means for exploring, constructing and communicating meaning. Members of the Clubhouse of Winnipeg and I decided on a PAR project using photovoice as means for exploring recovery based on the personal experience of the Clubhouse Members – Our Photos Our Voices. An Exploration of Recovery by the Clubhouse of Winnipeg. The goals of the Our Photos Our Voices project were to pilot a PAR and photovoice project, to facilitate discussions about recovery based on personal, local experience, and to produce a platform for sharing that local knowledge about recovery with others.

Research setting – the Clubhouse of Winnipeg

The Clubhouse of Winnipeg is an independent community-based mental health rehabilitation agency with funding from the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. The Clubhouse model stresses empowerment of individuals through collaboration to achieve personal and social change goals (Staples & Stein 2008). The Clubhouse is a Member-driven programme revolving around occupational, educational and leadership opportunities for Members. (The Clubhouse uses ‘Member’ as a capitalized title.) Members stress the importance of having a place where they feel comfortable and respected. Members use the Clubhouse to help
structure their day and for taking steps towards achieving their goals in education, work and healthy living. Many Members have health challenges that can result in people discounting their worth and their truth – at the Clubhouse, Members can move beyond their disabilities and towards their capacities. The Members involved as researchers in the *Our Voices Our Selves* count the Clubhouse as an important factor in their recovery (see Fig. 1, photo/text produced by a Member in the project).

**Research methodology – participatory action research**

The three words used in the name participatory action research encapsulate the principles of the PAR methodological argument. PAR is concerned with the equalitarian *participation* of concerned parties in the construction of knowledge (*research*) for the specific purpose of supporting *action* to solve problems of those involved in the research (Heron & Reason 2006, Bradbury Huang 2010). PAR does not simply involve research participants in the construction of knowledge about them; PAR involves research participants in the construction of their own knowledge for their own purposes. Ideally, PAR involves research participants in all aspects of the research process: formulation of research question, design, implementation, analysis, documentation and dissemination. A fundamental ethical principle in PAR is the equalization of power between the researcher and the participants and mechanisms to ensure equality in decision making (Stuart 1998).

Besides being participatory and action oriented, PAR honours various ways of knowing beyond quantitative and traditional qualitative ways of coming to know (Reason 2003). Statistics, surveys and even most qualitative methods are the purview of social scientists not part of the vocabulary of the average person, and so privileging these ways of knowing can exclude certain voices. Arts-based research methods, such as photography, can be effective means for accessing and expressing meaning from subjective experience (Liamputtong & Rumbold 2008). Positivist research methods attempt to remove the subjective in order to attain illusive objectivity, while in PAR accounting for subjectivity is fundamental to the process – knowledge is subjective, that is, produced by humans embedded within social contexts (Reason 2003). PAR privileges local knowledge produced in the context of social relationships for the express purpose of problem solving.

**Research method – photovoice**

The research method used in *Our Photos Our Voices* is called photovoice. Photovoice is a research method well suited to the principles of participant action research methodology. Photovoice is ‘based on the understanding that people are the experts on their own lives’ (Wang et al. 2004, p. 911). Photovoice uses photographs taken by research participants to illustrate their ideas, their concerns and the realities of their lives. Photovoice is well suited to eliciting knowledge from marginalized communities and supporting dissemination of their knowledge to the larger community. Photovoice research aims to: facilitate community discussion; access rich qualitative data about personal experience; promote community critical reflection and record community strengths and concerns; and empower marginalized communities to communicate with policy makers to effect change (Wang & Burris 1997, Wang et al. 2004, Baker & Wang 2006, Carlson et al. 2006, Castleden et al. 2008). Photovoice builds on the work of Paulo Freire to encourage community members to talk about their issues and make links between the situations in their lives and solutions (Baker & Wang 2006, Keller et al. 2008). In this way photovoice projects often blend research, education and action in order to facilitate critical awareness of issues important to the community, and support community members in identifying problems and potential solutions (Castleden et al. 2008).

**Research team**

The project involved researchers from Brandon University and from the Clubhouse of Winnipeg. The Clubhouse has had relationship since 2005 with the author and Brandon University student psychiatric nurses collaborating in a number of healthy living initiatives: weekly Health and Wellness group; smoking cessation programmes; and metabolic syndrome screening clinics. My role in the *Our Photos Our Voices* project was to structure and co-ordinate the project with the assistance of Bonnie Lambert, a psychiatric nursing student. The Clubhouse researchers (five Members and one staff) participated in research design, discussions on recovery, the design of the *Recovery Photo Gallery*, and were the author/photographers of the photo/text pieces in the final collection called the *Recovery Photo Gallery*. The five Clubhouse Member researchers are all men roughly between the ages of 35 and 70 who have experienced significant mental health challenges over many years.

**Research description – *Our Photos Our Voices* and the *Recovery Photo Gallery***

The project entailed the taking of photographs from daily life and constructing text to accompany selected photographs for the purpose of exploring, documenting and
sharing ideas about recovery. The six Clubhouse researchers volunteered to participate. Special attention was paid to explaining the collaborative nature of the project to Clubhouse Members. Power differentials are inherent in all relationships especially in relationships between ‘knowledge experts’ such as a university professor/psychiatric nurse and a research community who have personal experience of mental illness and treatment in the mental health services system. Reflexivity (reflection on one’s own effect on the research) is a critical aspect of PAR. Explanations on the project used everyday language and Clubhouse Members’ understanding checked at each step. As the project progressed, I was able to leave more and more decisions to the Clubhouse researchers: many of the best ideas and solutions to problems came from Clubhouse Members.

The Clubhouse researchers were trained in how to use free disposable cameras and how to stay within ethical boundaries while taking photographs which represented recovery to them. Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee. Clubhouse researchers were given copies of their own photographs to keep and were interviewed individually by the author using a loosely structured open-ended question format (Wang & Redwood-Jones 2001, Wang et al. 2004, Castleden et al. 2008). Interview notes were taken by Bonnie Lambert. The interview notes were transcribed and taken back to each Clubhouse researcher in a second private interview in order to collaboratively write text to accompany the three or four photographs each selected for inclusion in the Recovery Photo Gallery. The final Recovery Photo Gallery is the material result of the Our Photos Our Voices project and takes several forms: a set of 18 – 8 × 10 photo/text pieces; a computer slide show of the photo/text pieces; presentations and publications; and wall-mounted plagues of the photo/text pieces on permanent display at the Clubhouse of Winnipeg.

The concept of recovery was explored through the process of constructing text to go with the photographs and through larger group Clubhouse discussions. The final photo/text pieces document the researchers’ ideas about recovery which have been, and will continue to be, shared with others for further exploration on the concept of recovery. The photo/text pieces have been used in the Clubhouse Health and Wellness group in a number of ways for critical discussion of issues around recovery. Dissemination is a critical phase of a PAR project such that dissemination plans must be included in the design of the research while staying flexible to opportunities as they arise out of the project (Minkler et al. 2003). The Recovery Photo Gallery has been presented through a poster presentation at a national conference of the Mood Disorders Association, displayed at the Mental Health Education Resource Centre (Winnipeg), and presented to the Clubhouse board of directors and Clubhouse membership at large. Three local mental health facilities and two mental health advocacy groups are considering ways they can use the Recovery Photo Gallery in programming. As these stories are told through exhibition and discussion of the photo/text pieces, other ‘readers’ or audiences become part of the construction of meaning of recovery.

Research results – an example

Clubhouse Member and researcher Don took a photograph of his kitchen floor with garbage in a plastic Safeway bag and a broom (Fig. 2). Don was asked during his first interview to apply meaning to the photograph; he was encouraged to think what a garbage bag and broom in his apartment meant to him. As he ascribed meaning to each of his photos, and to the three selected for the photo gallery in particular, themes developed and a story emerged.

Bonnie and I, as audience and prompters, became part of this discovery of meaning. We could not help but be engaged as Don’s story began to emerge from the discussion of his photographs. Audiences of storytelling are part of the construction of the story (Riessman 1993). We

![Figure 2](Clubhouse Member photo/text piece (colour and background altered for print publication))
witnessed a story emerging about how Don had struggled to get an apartment of his own, of how he lived for years in a group home working towards stability in his life, and how he worked at the Clubhouse doing chores such as cleaning to prepare himself for the daily responsibilities of looking after his own apartment. Don’s personal story on the importance of home (housing you call your own) is powerfully and succinctly communicated to others through his photo/text pieces. The readers of his photo/text pieces will attach their own meanings and compare his ideas about home and recovery to their own ideas of home and recovery.

The Health and Wellness group at the Clubhouse used the photo/text pieces for critical reflection on issues of recovery and to make meaning together stimulated by powerful, real life experience. Several methods were used to facilitate discussion about recovery based on the photo/text pieces, but the most successful was based on a set of questions designed by the group members: what is recovery, why should we recover; how can we recover; who can help us recovery; when can we recover. Members had critical and insightful discussions, for instance, the Members debated whether mental health consumers can truly have the power to determine their own recovery goals within the context of a mental health system with the power to enforce involuntary admission and treatment. In the process of discussing recovery based on their own lived experience each was affirmed and group Members were inspired.

Discussion

Participatory action research stands for partnership with and participation of communities involved in all aspects of the research. Peter Reason argues that participation as equals in research is not a nice add-on or variant of research appropriate in certain circumstances but that participation is a political imperative because participation is fundamental to the ‘human right of persons to contribute to decisions which affect them’ (Reason 1998, p. 149). In the case of mental health recovery, it is imperative that consumers themselves be involved in constructing personal and collective meanings of recovery.

Peter Reason also argues that the full involvement of all research participants in the research process is an epistemological imperative (Reason 1998). Reason sets out four ways of knowing: experiential, lived experience and empathetic connection; presentational, drawing on artistic expression; propositional, relying on concepts and theory; and practical, knowing how to do a skill (Reason 1998). PAR values an extended epistemology, that is, values a variety of ways of coming to know (Reason 1998, Liamputtong & Rumbold 2008). The expanded epistemology called for in PAR and actualized through photovoice opens the door to innovative ways for mental health consumers to access and construct meaning about their illness experience and recovery; they allowed a language and ways of knowing which are accessible to Clubhouse Members.

The recovery stories of Clubhouse members are important—they are stories of strength, wisdom, perseverance and triumph. Their stories have been interrupted by the chaos of illness and overpowered by psychiatric and mental health service narratives on what illness and recovery mean (Frank 1995). Stories are the way individuals make meaning out of their experiences and the way meaning is shared within communities. Arthur Frank’s work on illness and recovery stories tells of the critical importance of stories.

Seriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice. They need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often takes away. . . . When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story. (Frank 1995, pp. xii–xiii)

The arts-based approach of using photographs in photovoice helps people access their experience and construct meaning out of their experience in order to present their stories to themselves and to others.

Many Clubhouse Members are accustomed to being discounted as sources of valid knowledge and subjected to the knowledge of experts. PAR is concerned with the relationship aspect of research in that power differentials must be acknowledged and balanced, and consensus must be negotiated with research partners (Kemmis 2010). PAR seeks to disrupt the exclusive claims of dominant social groups to valid knowledge and focus on the value of locally constructed knowledge. Gaventa & Cornwall (2006) argue that a fundamental premise behind PAR is that the methodology shifts the power balance from professional researchers in control of knowledge construction to individuals and communities in control of the construction of their own knowledge for their own purposes. Gaventa & Cornwall (2006) go on to say that ‘the control of knowledge as a way of influencing consciousness is critical to the exercise of power’ (p. 72). Power is the ability to frame what is possible (Foucault as cited by Gaventa & Cornwall 2006, p. 73). Power is the ability to construct and follow your own vision. This is empowerment – this is hope – this is recovery.

Concluding remarks

Photovoice proved a useful research method for the construction of local knowledge about recovery and as a vehicle for sharing that knowledge because the method uses
accessible ways of coming to know, facilitates community critical reflection and builds dissemination into the research design. PAR is an ideal research methodology for mental health consumer groups because PAR values capacity building in and empowerment of local communities to solve community identified problems and goals, and because PAR seeks individual and social transformation to achieve social justice goals (Bradbury Huang 2010). The project’s goal was to facilitate the exploration of recovery using peoples’ own lived experience and to share a representation of that experience with others for their own exploration; the project also demonstrates the potential for the active participation of consumers in research to empower consumers both as individuals and as a social collective. The Our Photos Our Voices project is a beginning not an end; it is more a process than a product. The exploration of the meaning of recovery will continue in ever widening ripples for the researchers, for the Clubhouse and for others in the community using the work.

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References


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