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Who Knows the Streets as Well as the Homeless? Promoting Personal and Community Action Through Photovoice

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Photovoice is an innovative participatory action research (PAR) method based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community-based approach to documentary photography. It codifies the goals of involving community members in taking pictures, telling stories, and informing policy makers about issues of concern at the grassroots level (Wang & Burris, 1994). The purpose of our Language of Light Photovoice project was to create such opportunities for men and women living at a shelter in Ann Arbor, Michigan. 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 policy makers whose decisions influence their lives. We asked them to photograph their everyday health, work, and life conditions as a way to document their struggles and strengths; to promote critical dialogue through group discussion about their photographs; and to reach policy makers and the broader public about issues of concern to homeless people. The authors’ approach used photovoice, an innovative participatory action research method based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community-based approach to documentary photography. Photovoice involves community members’ taking pictures, telling stories, and informing policy makers about issues of concern at the grassroots level. The authors describe and analyze the project, offer recommendations to health promotion practitioners carrying out photovoice projects with society’s most vulnerable groups, and discuss implications for practice.

Authors’ Note: The Washtenaw Council for the Arts provided valuable financial support for Language of Light Photovoice. The Shelter Association of Washtenaw County made the project possible with generous logistic support. We are grateful to Adrian Wylie and Linda Wan for their support and teaching and to Fong Wang for his advice and editing. We thank especially the project participants for their time and insight.
their struggles and strengths; to promote critical dialogue through group discussion about their photographs; and to reach policy makers and the broader public about issues of concern to homeless people. In this article, we describe the project’s unique contributions as a strategic health promotion intervention.

As Toro and McDonell (1992) note, public understanding of the plight of homelessness is important because public opinion can influence policies affecting homeless persons. The specific primary aims of the Language of Light Photovoice project were to enable participants to counteract stereotypes about homeless people and to give shape to public perceptions about issues that affect their lives. The concept and methodology of photovoice adhere 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).

BACKGROUND

Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique (Wang & Burris, 1997). The process involves providing community people with cameras so that they can photograph their everyday health and work realities. Photovoice has three main goals: (a) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (b) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (c) to reach policy makers and people who can be mobilized for change. The photovoice concept, method, and use for participatory action 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). Health promotion practitioners have subsequently invited different communities in Detroit and Flint, Michigan (Vanucci, 1999; Vaughn, 1998); Contra Costa County, California (Spears, 1999); and New Haven, Connecticut, to use photovoice. Theoretical underpinnings of photovoice and its application as an effective technique for doing participatory needs assessment, conducting participatory evaluation, reaching policy makers, 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). The Web site www.photovoice.com provides an overview.

Photovoice integrates Paulo Freire’s (1970) approach to critical education, feminist theory, and a participatory approach to documentary photography. First, Freire’s educational praxis stresses the importance of people’s sharing and speaking from their own experience, seeing connections among their individual situations, 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). Second, feminist theory suggests that power accrues to those who have voice, set language, make history, and participate in decisions (Smith, 1987). Feminist theory is relevant to photovoice in that participants may use this approach to enhance their public presence. Finally, participatory approaches to documentary photography developed by Ewald (1985), Hubbard (1991), 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.

In turn, several well-known initiatives involving homeless people and self-expression served as forerunners to this project. 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’ resumes. The Artist and Homeless Collaborative has promoted community health by taking the practice of art as an “operating theater in which the often polarized segments of a community come together to create something not seen before” (Wolper, 1995).

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” (Wolper, 1995).

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, engaging 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 report its value in helping them rethink their relationships with community people (Wolf, Goldfader, & Lehan, 1997). And 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). These projects focus on the creative process of involving people in promoting their own well-being and that of the community.

The photovoice concept and method is designed to enable people to create 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.

THE LANGUAGE OF LIGHT
PHOTOVOICE METHODS

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, the Language of Light Photovoice project was initiated by the third author who was both a board member of the Shelter Association of Washtenaw County and a professional photographer. She felt she knew relatively little about the people whom she was representing and contacted the first author to collaborate on a photovoice project. Major project phases included training the trainers, recruiting participants, carrying out workshops, and sharing information with policy makers, journalists, and the broader community. This section describes these phases.

Training the trainers/facilitators. Training for facilitators included a full knowledge of the goals, theoretical underpinnings, ethical concerns, and methodology of photovoice; group process skills and experience; and the ability to teach others how to use the camera provided to participants. For this project, the authors served as facilitators. Our team did not have prior experience working directly with homeless people, but each person had extensive community organizing and advocacy experience.

Recruiting participants. Participants were recruited at the city’s shelters through contact with project facilitators and distribution of flyers. Facilitators welcomed all shelter residents who volunteered to participate. Eight men and 3 women volunteered, for which they received a stipend of US$20 per session. The men ranged in age from 24 to 55 years and the women 18 to 61. Two participants disclosed head injuries. The 11 participants included 6 European Americans, 3 African Americans, 1 Asian American, and 1 Latino American.

Carrying out workshops. Over a 1-month period, participants attended three 4-hour workshops at one of the city’s day shelters, with concurrent workshops held separately for men and women. This time frame created a hectic schedule but also made it easier to maintain contact with, and generate 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 form for which each participant’s signature was requested and signified their informed consent to participate in the workshops; camera instruction and self-portraits; a guided photo shoot around the downtown area; and wrap-up and evaluation.

The discussion of cameras, ethics, and power focused on participants’ safety; the camera as a tool conferring authority as well as responsibility; ways to approach people when taking their picture; and the giving of photographs back to people to express appreciation and build ties: What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take their picture? Should someone take pictures of other people without their knowledge? What kind of responsibility does carrying a camera confer? 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. We asked participants to obtain on this form the signed permission of each identifiable person photographed, to allow that such images be shared publicly at a future time. Risks to participants are further discussed in the commentary by Wang in this issue of Health Promotion Practice.
Who knows the streets as well as the homeless? During the introduction to the photovoice concept and method, participants looked at images of downtown Ann Arbor taken by the shelter board member. In each photograph, participants were able to identify every landmark, alley, and building as well as 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 at US$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. A unique feature of the Holga camera is that it permits double and multiple exposures of images, thus allowing the photographer to literally layer his or her meanings. Participants used black-and-white film, which is particularly well suited to the Holga.

After learning how to load and advance film, participants walked around town together in a guided photo shoot. Participants encouraged one another to experiment with angles, reflections, and shadows. At their first session, they each shot a full roll, learned how to unload the film, and discussed their experiences using the camera. Having a guided photo shoot during the first session enabled participants to see, at the very next session, a contact sheet showing their first roll of pictures and to discuss them.

In the second and subsequent sessions, participants worked on their own or in small groups, took several more rolls of film, and examined photographic contact sheets of all their images. They also received enlarged prints of images that they felt most significant or simply liked best. Some participants did writing exercises about their photos, using the acronym SHOWeD: What do you see here? What is really happening here? How does this relate to our lives? Why does this problem, concern, or strength exist? What can we do about it? We invited participants, regardless of whether they wrote, to be interviewed and audio-taped about their photographs. During group discussions, participants described and analyzed the content and context of their photographs. They gave positive feedback to one another about their images. The group discussions helped to prepare participants for the later, public showing 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 policy makers, journalists, and the broader community. Subsequent to participants’ approval, and with the understanding that their participation in all events was voluntary, we began early on to arrange public forums and venues. Participants conveyed their perspectives to community leaders and the public by selecting those photographs that they felt most interesting or simply liked best and then by writing descriptive captions for a series of articles that appeared in local newspapers; by participating in a gallery exhibition; and by holding a major public forum at the city’s largest theater.

How were media coverage, gallery space, theater time, and union labor brokered? To garner media coverage, we sent letters and telephoned print and electronic media. We especially sought out journalists who covered community- and local-interest beats. The third author who was a Shelter board member and, more significantly, a lifelong town resident gained a central gallery’s invitation to hold an exhibition and free use of the city’s largest theater for the public forum. She drew on her longtime local networks to arrange these venues and garner community support. We found policy makers, such as city council members, notably responsive to letters and follow-up postcards inviting them to the public events. Practitioners interested in learning more about the methodology and in applying and tailoring photovoice to their own participatory health promotion aims, settings, and issues may find useful the articles and Web site cited earlier.

DISCUSSION

We conducted a multimethod evaluation that included carrying out ongoing formative evaluation throughout the project; surveying participants preworkshop and postworkshop; garnering feedback from participants using an open-ended, audio-taped 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 preworkshop and postworkshop surveys to lend themselves to statistical analyses. Informed by the other evaluation approaches, we frame this discussion by analyzing the extent to which the Language of Light photovoice project met its three main goals as well as a fourth, unstated goal.
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 55-year-old man called 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 is 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 policy makers and others something many did not know: that some people living in the shelter held two or even three jobs. People also photographed what gave them hope. A 53-year-old man called 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. We had anticipated that participants might focus attention on and perhaps even wish to mobilize around the major homeless policy issue being debated, that of moving the shelter out of the city to a remote area near the dump. 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.

The third goal was to reach policy makers 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. As noted above, participants conveyed their perspectives to a broader audience in three ways. First, participants snapped photographs and wrote descriptive text for newspaper articles. Second, participants’ photographs and captions were exhibited locally at a downtown gallery; one advocacy outcome of this venue was that gallery staff reported it was the most well-attended exhibit in their history. Finally, several hundred people, including policy makers, journalists, researchers, public health graduate students, and the public, came to the city’s largest theater where photographers showed their slides with accompanying narrations and spoke to an audience of present and future community leaders. An advocacy outcome included coverage by three newspapers and cable television of this event. We conducted this photovoice project at a time when homeless advocates observed that constructing a new, 120-bed shelter on the outskirts of town was “designed to placate downtown merchants” at the expense of homeless people (Hall, 1997). At this writing, the city continues to consider investing $3 million in the proposed new facility that would make it extremely difficult for shelter users to get to their workplaces as well as to sites that offer health care, education, and services. The photovoice project did not substantively affect these plans but enabled board members, planners, community people, and community leaders to rethink issues from the perspective of the homeless.

Believing that it would be overly ambitious and unrealistic, we did not at the outset attempt to measure the project’s success according to an unstated goal, that is, whether participants would be able to adhere to the shelter’s 60-day limit and find permanent shelter without having to ask for an extension, requested by approximately 75% of shelter users. However, within 3 months of initiating the project with the women and men, 10 of the 11 participants had left the shelter and moved into their own housing. In addition to the obvious catalyst of the 60-day-limit, we offer additional reflections on this unanticipated finding.

First, 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 18-year-old participant had just arrived at the shelter from another state the previous day; despite her personal suffering, she presented a relentlessly positive attitude and ability to encourage others.

Second, we speculate that participation in photovoice may have benefited its participants 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, policy makers, researchers, and the broader society of which they are a part. For example, one 50-year-old man found 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 provided by Language of Light Photovoice. Or again, the 18-year-old female 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 61-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 notice 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 to think in a parallel way how he organized other aspects of his life.

We wish to note that despite their own extraordinary hardships, those who decided to consider 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. We observed that 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 the women’s and men’s groups, 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 skills as well as compassion. We found that participants tended to close ranks in support of one another if someone shared a debilitating or sad experience.

Outside the photovoice sessions, we often observed photovoice participants walking around town together in groups of two to four people. Participating in our 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 better survive. We also observed that 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. Our observation may be underpinned by Thoits’s (1986) research suggesting 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.

Other interesting findings emerged. Having a camera around one’s neck suggests 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 applied in the Language of Light, the photovoice approach has its weaknesses. First, we are not able to say whether the housing solutions found by participants have been long lasting. As Breakey (1997) notes, among homeless people, “Some have transient episodes of homelessness and health profiles that may be little different from those of other people in poverty. Others exhibit cyclical patterns in and out of permanent housing.” 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. 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 inordinately magnified when the project involves society’s most vulnerable members. During the course of the project, a shelter user with schizophrenia hit one of the project participants in the face with a metal chair in what the latter described as a gay bashing (see commentary by Wang, 2000 [this
issue). We strove to minimize risks as much as possible and view the safety of participants as paramount, but we could not prevent every serious danger they may have faced daily.

Third, as indicated above, 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 non-participant whom she perceived as complaining, negative, and self-pitying. 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. Toro, Trickett, Wall, and Salem (1991) support examining how the introduction of a new service for homeless people may affect the ongoing pattern of existing or future services. We agree with their counsel that “the principle of interdependence alerts researchers, interventionists, and policy makers to attend to the full range of positive and negative consequences of their activities”. 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 community responsibility (Minkler, 1978).

CONCLUSION

Based on our experience with the Language of Light Photovoice project, we offer two recommendations to health promotion practitioners considering a photovoice project with homeless people or with people belonging to another of society’s most vulnerable groups. The first best practice recommendation is to plan, target, and involve at the outset community leaders who can be mobilized for change (Wang, 1999). Participants’ photographs and stories can reach policy makers 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 exchanges among participants, health workers, policy makers, journalists, and community leaders over the images of interest. Not by happenstance do these interactions occur. From the start of the Language of Light Photovoice project, subsequent to participants’ approval, we recruited, wrote, and informed the mayor, city council members, journalists, and other community leaders. We chose these people because they might serve as an influential audience for participants’ images and stories and could help us amplify the participants’ insights.

The second best practice—indeed, crucial—recommendation is to be aware of, and execute ways to minimize, participants’ risks, including physical harm and loss of privacy to themselves or their community. Put another way, participants’ safety and well-being are paramount. Health promotion practitioners cannot fully prevent all dangers to participants, particularly homeless people or other groups of society’s most vulnerable members, but they can and must minimize potential dangers to participants in several ways. Practitioners should (a) underscore during group discussions the participants’ responsibilities when they carry a camera to respect the privacy and rights of others, (b) facilitate critical dialogue that yields specific suggestions and ways to respect others’ privacy and rights, and (c) emphasize that no picture is worth taking if it begets the photographer harm or ill will. As noted earlier, we obtained written consent from participants. In addition, we asked participants to obtain written consent from the people they photograph. This has some drawbacks—it sometimes yields stiff, less spontaneous pictures—but we find the benefits more compelling: preventing misunderstanding and building trust by giving participants an opportunity to describe the project and solicit the subjects’ own insights about a community issue, establishing the possibility of a long-term relationship that may allow for future photographs and exchange of knowledge, and acquiring written consent to use the photographs for health promotion aims.

The Language of Light Photovoice project suggests that photovoice may make several important contributions to health promotion practice. These contributions synthesize the methodology’s theoretical underpinnings: (a) the critical production of knowledge and expertise that influence personal and community action, (b) the accrual of power to those who participate in promoting their own and their community’s health, and (c) the analytical use of a community-based approach to photography as personal voice. First, 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 suspicion. Regardless of the health professionals’ experience,
skills, or commitment, they may initially be perceived as part of the problem—elitist, ignorant of people’s everyday realities, priorities, and survival needs, and motivated by careerism. Second, important variations in health needs of homeless people are often overlooked in health planning (Ensign & Santelli, 1997); photovoice offers a rich vehicle to gain important contextual information for understanding the health states, behavior, needs, strengths, and concerns of homeless people. Third, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have defined the significance of asset-based approaches to personal and community action; participants can use photovoice as a unique tool to map personal and community assets. 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, facilitated by the opportunity to be listened to—not talked at—and a sense of political efficacy (Zimmerman, 1989). Fifth, Bassuk et al. (1996) describe their finding that sheltered homeless mothers had few social supports to buffer stress, improve well-being, and suggest the positive implications of social networks. Health promotion practitioners may use photovoice as a creative and effective method for fostering social support among participants. Sixth, it 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.

What final implications for application does the Language of Light Photovoice project hold? The women and men involved in the Language of Light Photovoice project are in so many basic ways clearly representative of thousands of people who are homeless and looking for means to find adequate shelter, food, health care, education, and employment. Photovoice can 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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