Using Image-Based Participatory Action Research to Improve Community Health: Photo Voice

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Executive Summary

Recent years have seen a proliferation of new research methods. Participatory research as well as image-based analysis has been used in numerous ways particularly related to community health. Participatory action research (PAR) is focused on integrating knowledge with action and collaborating with people in a community.

Image-based research is associated with PAR and might be applied with names such as photo elicitation, photovoice, photo vision, photo mapping, visual analysis, and photographic representation. All of these approaches allow observations of particular phenomena and have slightly different strategies, but all may be used to collect and apply information about a particular topic. The use of visual techniques such as photovoice and photo mapping have been particularly useful in helping understand how people view health environments.

The purpose of this research brief is to introduce the use of photovoice and photo mapping, and to illustrate how photovoice, in particular, has been used in two studies with young people in communities. One of the studies was done in collaboration with GP RED, a non-profit organization with the mission of facilitating the creation of interdisciplinary, innovative, practical management tools and strategies to enhance and promote the integration of health, recreation, and land management through research, education, and development.

Photovoice Rationale and Guidelines

Photovoice is one example of an image-based participatory action research method. It is a technique developed by Wang and Burris (1997) who used it successfully to work with women to address health issues. GP RED used the technique of photo voice in a recent study in Prince George's County, Maryland. To prepare for this project, a Photovoice orientation manual was developed by GP RED. This manual (link in reference list) gives direction for using this technique. More information can be found in the manual, but we highlight some of the major points in this research brief to demonstrate the value and use of photovoice.

Several assumptions are made when using photovoice:
• Images teach.
• Pictures can influence policy.
• Community members can participate in creating and defining the images that shape healthful public policy.
• The process requires that planners bring together policy makers and other influential people as an audience.
• Photovoice emphasizes individual and community action.

Further, three main goals related to community health improvement using photovoice have been identified:

1. To help those who are often unheard such as young people to gain a voice, enabling them to record and reflect on their experiences and their communities' conditions, both positive and negative.
2. To encourage critical consciousness. Through choosing, discussing, and reflecting on the subjects of their photographs, the photographers can come to a clearer understanding of their circumstances and the economic, social, psychological, and political forces that shape them.
3. To bring about change that will improve conditions and enhance lives by reaching and influencing policy makers.

Photovoice projects can take different forms and can include people from different backgrounds and circumstances. Some general guidelines make photovoice projects successful:

• **Orientation**. Participants should be trained in the basic techniques of documentary photography and the use of the equipment. They should also receive some grounding in photographic ethics and in keeping themselves safe while photographing.

• Staff members of the sponsoring organization need training in the same areas as the participants, and in anticipating and handling situations that might arise from the process. Photographs can have emotional as well as documentary and aesthetic content for people who take them and for others in the group. Staff must be prepared to protect both the emotional and physical health of participants and the integrity of the project.
• **Support**. Participants must have the chance to show and discuss their photos. They need a safe and supportive environment in which they can learn a new skill and gain confidence in their ability to express opinions and ideas.
• **Action**. Action can come in different forms ranging from a show of photos within the organization, to presentations to policy makers, to use of the photos for research, and/or assessment of community conditions. Participants should have the chance to see their photos used in a positive and significant way.

Information about the ethical aspects of using photovoice or any type of photo elicitation strategy are important to consider. Bugos et al. (2014) provided a useful list of guidelines to consider: strategies for collecting and managing photographs, choosing an interview location, developing the interview guide, troubleshooting the interview, approaches to anticipating and managing ethical concerns on the use of visual data in public health research, photography ethics training, and protecting participant confidentiality and privacy.

Highlighting Prince George's County Photovoice Project

In 2012, Prince George's County (MD) received funding to explore Safe Access to Recreational Opportunities (SARO) with the purposes of reducing chronic disease rates, preventing the development of secondary conditions, and addressing health disparities. A report from which the following descriptions and findings came was written by the Institute for Public Health Innovation (2015).

SARO was a strategy focused on increasing access to healthy and safe physical environments to improve physical activity. In partnership with Prince George's County Executive's Transforming Neighborhoods Initiative (TNI), the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), GP RED, Wildflower Consulting, and the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), an in-depth assessment of connectivity and safety within a study area of a ½ to 1 mile

radius around the Bladensburg, Langley Park, and Suitland Community Centers was conducted. This collaboration aimed to create safe access to recreation opportunities so that children, youth, and families could confidently walk or bicycle to these locations and feel secure in these spaces.

Safe Routes to Play (SRTP) was a youth-centered planning process that helped communities assess connectivity between neighborhoods and parks, playgrounds, trails, and natural areas for children and families and focused on methods of active transportation such as walking or biking. SRTP was a concept developed by GP RED that suggested children are commuters and deserve the choice for active transportation. The SRTP components involving youth included:

- **Community Tours:** Tours of each community were conducted to familiarize stakeholders with existing conditions.
- **Photovoice:** Youth engaged in this photojournalism activity documenting barriers to active transportation and connectivity barriers and provided their insights and proposed solutions.
- **Umap:** Youth provided their perspective on how they travel within the target communities, documenting their routes and methods of transportation.

In addition to these youth activities, the project also included leadership forums, community connectivity forums, facilitative leadership training, policy and trend analyses, and active transportation access inventory and analysis.

Findings from youth input were similar across all three communities, and the most consistent safety concerns broadly included:

- **Gang and criminal activity:** Threats from other people such as gang members, those involved in criminal activity, older youth, or untrusted adults, create a sense of fear.
- **Perception of danger in locations with limited public visibility:** Youth reported locations with limited visibility, such as heavily wooded areas or road underpasses, as dangerous.
- **Frequent use of unsafe routes to reach destinations, including shortcuts or social pathways:** Shortcuts and social pathways through less safe areas were commonly used instead of longer routes that may be safer.

Photo 1 below shows youth working together to map their photos in Prince George's County. The findings from the youth were incorporated into a larger plan for each of the three communities.

Photo 1. Youth from Prince George's County, MD map their Community and Photos

In conjunction with the project, information was also included from youth regarding their assessment of involvement with Photovoice. The post evaluation summarized for the three communities showed that between 65%- 92% of the youth found the experience excellent or very good and 8-35% rated it good or average. Between 90%-100% of the youth felt empowered to voice their opinions. Examples of comments from the Photovoice experience as expressed by the youth included:

"People actually cared about the community and wanted to help make it better"

"Was able to walk in neighborhood and really see positives and negatives in the community"

"Someone is giving us a chance to change the unsafe parts of Langley Park"

"You can tell people about your opinions through pictures"

"It gave us a better look about our own community to see what we admire and can improve"

"Had a voice in my community"

"Took pictures of things that needed to be fixed"

"You may have a chance to change something"

An Example from "Creating Safe Neighborhoods"

The number of identified studies using image-based methods has skyrocketed in recent years. In addition to the example from Prince George's County, another illustration of the outcomes of a photovoice project conducted in 2011-12 came from "Creating Safe Neighborhoods," a partnership between the City of Manchester, University of New Hampshire, and Dartmouth (Researchers: Semra Aytur, University of New Hampshire; Karen Schifferdecker, Prevention Research Center at Dartmouth; and Rebecca Butcher, UNH-M and Center for Program Design and Evaluation at Dartmouth).

As part of this Community-Based Participatory Research study, this project was conducted in Manchester, NH to:

1. Explore youth perceptions of relationships between safety, active living, and healthy eating in the context of their daily lives
2. Understand barriers/enablers of health in their neighborhoods

Key conclusions from this study included:

- Photovoice greatly enhanced an understanding of immigrant/refugee teens' perceptions of neighborhood safety, health, and active living, especially with respect to juxtapositions of perceived barriers and enablers of health that often coexisted in close geographical proximity. Photo 2 shows an example of one of the photos taken regarding unsafe conditions.
- Youth recognized that they were targets of advertising for beer and cigarettes near parks and neighborhood corner stores.

Photo 2. The young person who took the photo said, "The stop sign is on the ground. It's dangerous because car accidents could happen and cars don't know when to stop and they might crash into the people that are crossing the streets."

- Photos revealed vacant lots, empty storefronts, and unused spaces in the city, which teens described as giving a poor impression of their neighborhoods.
- Youth consistently voiced their frustrations with landlords who did not take better care of apartment buildings (e.g., broken doors and windows, heat that didn't work, inaccessible entrances, litter and debris in yards and alleyways).
- Youth viewed these issues as essential to healthy living, and since many of their parents had limited English skills, teens were often responsible for negotiating with landlords.
- Compared to boys, girls' perceptions of vulnerability constrained their geographies in ways that limited their ability to engage in physical activity
- As Photovoice sessions progressed, participants discussed ways that they could initiate change.

  - Boys voiced higher comfort levels in reporting crime and disorder to police.

  - Girls began speaking about reaching out to resettlement mentors, guidance counselors, teachers, and the student council to offer recommendations.

An Art Exhibit and a community-wide Photovoice training session were presented at the end of the study to enable community members to conduct future Photovoice projects themselves. Photo 3 shows the art show that was put together as part of the New Hampshire project.

Photo 3. Photo Exhibit for New Hampshire Project.

Ideas about Participatory Photo Mapping

Another example of an image based method to improve community health was described by Dennis and others (2009). Participatory Photo Mapping (PPM) is a tool for exploring the experience of place and for communicating this experience to community stakeholders and local decision-makers. Using PPM helped communities uncover supports for and barriers to well-being, especially concerns related to the built environment from a geo-spatial perspective. The goal of PPM was to use PPM in collaborative projects to improve the health and well-being of communities.

The PPM method combined:
- Photographs
- Narratives
- Maps
- Presentations

PPM allowed participants to assess the social and environmental determinants of health, safety, and well-being; address perceptions of neighborhood environments; identify community supports and barriers to health, safety and well-being; and call for action by presenting information to stakeholders and decision-makers.

The PPM process had four steps similar but somewhat different from photovoice:

1. Provide participants with digital cameras and GPS receivers for documenting routine use of community and recreation environments in their neighborhoods.
2. Use photographs to guide narrative interview sessions during which emerging themes are attached to particular place images.
3. Map images and narratives as part of a neighborhood-level geographic information system (GIS).
4. Use insights gained to communicate information to community stakeholders and decision-makers to prompt action.

Photo mapping is but one emerging example of how data can be collected and used to improve community living.

Conclusions and Implications

Image-based research allows opportunities for collecting data that can aid in promoting community health by providing visual representations of concerns and issues. It is particularly useful for groups that may have been excluded or underrepresented in the past. As evidenced from the data obtained as well as the assessment of this approach, the methods offer many potential applications for the future.

To summarize, the use of the image-based methods have several advantages. They allow direct participation by community members in assessing community living environments. Talking about photos is a way to elicit conversation, even among some individuals who are not as articulate as others. It also provides a means for community members to communicate with policy makers concerning what they "see." Exhibits of photographs are a means to share perceptions among a variety of people. To coin a common cliché, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

This research brief has provided an overall introduction based on some of the work done by GP RED and others. Many excellent resources exist for getting further information about the method and its potential. We have listed a few examples below.

References and Additional Resources

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