LIFE THROUGH A LENS: Photovoice and Leadership

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Introduction

Today more than ever, images bombard and surround us. Rarely do we get to see inside "the real lives of real people." Photovoice is a creative vehicle used to depict the daily experiences, challenges, and opportunities around us, and open our eyes to the lives and needs of others in our community. It is also a method that captures the realities of daily life by the people who live it. I first fell in love with this methodology during my final research project for my undergraduate degree at Ryerson University in Disability Studies. I used photovoice as a way to explore life experiences of students with disabilities at Ryerson and to challenge accessibility issues they face everyday. Armed with disposable cameras, they engaged in creative expression to document their ‘life through a lens.’ From my experience, the outcome of this project was well received and it has opened my eyes to an interesting and unique way to make change in society. My aim for this article is to introduce and explore the use of photovoice within the mental health community, and to enlighten and encourage occupational therapists to use this example of arts-informed research in their own practice to advocate for the greater inclusion of people living with mental health issues.

“A photo is always a frozen moment in time, and so viewing a photo is not only a step backwards in time but an encounter with mortality. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art...All photographs are memento mori. To make a photograph is to participate in another person’s mortality, vulnerability, mutability." (Sontag, 2001)

Meaning of Photographs

The majority of people like to share pictures and tell the stories behind them, whether it’s from vacations, the birth of a new child, weddings or simply the enjoyment of sharing a good photograph. I have been a photographer since high school when my parents gave me my first SLR camera. Photography was a way for me to share my story with friends and family in a way that words
could not describe. It allowed me to create memories that in time will share the story of my life with future generations. As an avid photographer, I have learned over time that the meaning behind the photographs is what engages us.

Before I introduce what photovoice is, I wanted to take a moment to share some knowledge around the meaning of photographs. An image, especially a positive print, is captured by a camera and reproduced on a photosensitive surface. They are still life images and are versions of reality formed by the photographer’s point of view. Photographers use images to convey messages to particular audiences (Sontag, 2001). As the expression goes, “a photograph says a thousand words.” Although photos reflect the perspective of photographers and have tremendous power to communicate information, they also have tremendous power to communicate misinformation, especially if the viewer is not careful how they are read (Sontag, 2001).

Reading photographs presents a unique set of challenges. As viewers, we tend to view photographs with a basic analysis of who, what, where and when. Viewers are left to fill in the blanks on their own, and thus could make assumptions they are unaware based on their own experiences or values. I think that the most important question to ask when examining photographs is “why?” The significant ‘why’ questions to ask are: Why was this photograph taken? Why is it that they chose to capture such an image? Why was it taken at that moment? Why is this important to them? After asking, and answering, these particular questions, we can really place ourselves, as viewers, in that moment in time. This provides us with a clear understanding of the experiences of the photographer to find meaning in these photos (Sontag, 2001).

What is Photovoice?

Visual ethnography and photography have been used to empower individuals and to help them to “tell their story” of self-expression and self-presentation. Photovoice is a term used to describe a form of participatory research whereby a group of individuals are provided camera
equipment and offered an opportunity to document their findings through the use of photography. Photovoice utilizes this powerful mode of communication and can invoke reflection and discussion. It is a way of accessing other people’s worlds and making those worlds accessible to others. It uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise (Photovoice, 2002). It was formerly referred to as photo novella, when Wang and Burris developed the idea in 1992 in the field of health promotion and education as a grassroots approach of participatory action research method (Wang and Burris, 1997).

Caroline Wang’s photovoice is based on the premise, “What experts think is important may not match what people at the grassroots think is important” (Wang & Burris, 1997). Issues or problems from participants are identified through photographs that have affected a group in their community. Photovoice offers participants an opportunity to define for themselves and others what is valuable and worth preserving, and what needs to be changed. The photos taken form the basis of a discussion that can lead to increased awareness, advocacy and potential change. According to Wang & Burris (1997), photovoice in its premise has three main goals:

- to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns,
- to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and
- to reach policymakers.

Photovoice is all about points-of-view, and researchers are now discovering that this particular method can engage people, especially those with mental illness. Wang (1987) describes that almost anyone can learn to use a camera. Photovoice can be powerful to women, but more importantly for children, people with disabilities, and people who are socially stigmatized, such as people living with mental illness. It recognizes that such people often have an expertise and insight
into their own communities and worlds that professionals and outsiders lack (Photovoice, 2002). Photovoice is not a mere reshuffling of information about a community and its needs, but entails a process in which people reflect on their community, “contextualizing” the photos and codifying the major themes that emerge from the discussions of the photos (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). The series of group discussions that are the hallmark of photovoice provide a space in which people who have been traditionally shut out of power can articulate a collective voice and develop their vision of what is possible (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005)

**Photovoice Technique: Background and Literature**

As pioneers to this particular research method, Wang and Burris (1997) first used it to empower women living in the remote countryside of Yunnan Province in China. They developed photovoice working with these Chinese women to identify health and labor issues that affected them so that policy makers could be informed about the issues of greatest concern to the community. They used photographs and narrative stories and were encouraged to focus on community assets, community interests and needs, and anything else they think policymakers need to know concerning the health of their community. In this study, Wang and Burris (1997) listed advantages of this approach, which included the shift of perspective from researcher to community. This process demonstrated that obtaining the data strictly from the participant’s perspective resulting in an increased accuracy in the portrayal of these Chinese women’s community issues and needs, as well it increased community participation, and stimulated social action. They also discovered in their research methods the disadvantages that included risks to participants or their families through exposure, the inability to “standardize” the process, and that there was a need to examine the participatory approach for unequal power that affects outcome (Wang & Burris, 1997).
Since 1997, the use of photovoice has grown tremendously across all populations and professionals, clearly demonstrating its effectiveness and impact towards social change. However, there are very limited studies conducted in occupational therapy or occupational science by occupational therapists. A photovoice study by Andonian (2010), entitled Community participation of people with mental health issues within an urban environment identified factors facilitating and inhibiting community participation of people with mental health issues living in the community. Her participants were able to suggest methods to promote community participation for people with mental health issues, which will inform service delivery and program development. Some of the photographs (shown below), depict themes chosen by the participants: difficulty performing daily living tasks; feelings of isolation; the positive role of friendships/supports; and the challenges of medication management. Overall, the photographs and descriptions of this study powerfully conveyed the ongoing, demanding nature if the process of clients’ managing mental health issues, and this can inform intervention strategies and advocacy efforts (Andonian, 2010).

Photovoice- An Impacting Method

I cannot stress this enough, but photovoice offers a chance for marginalized groups, such as individuals living with a mental illness, to express themselves through photography. Telling their story allows the individual, as an artist, the pleasure of reliving an event captured in time. It gives them control over their narrative and the interaction through an intimate social exchange into one’s life. One key aspect of the introducing photovoice method is that it puts people in charge of how they present themselves and how they depict their situations (Booth & Booth, 2003). This shows that there is a shift of control over of documenting the lives of people with disabilities from the powerful (researcher) to the powerless (mental illness community) or the observer to the observed (Booth & Booth, 2003). Photovoice also offers individuals living with mental illness, the ability to participate in one’s community, which is seen as being inclusive, thus contributing to well-being and quality of life. As we have seen, mental illness presents an identity of exclusion, which takes away the freedom to
participate at multiple levels in the community. Putting cameras in people’s hands empowers them in a way that buries the issues of acceptance and conformity frequently raised in other forms of research (Booth & Booth, 2003).

**Photovoice, Occupational Therapy and Leadership**

Photovoice is a great fit with occupational therapy. Not only is photography a creative occupation but it can be used to help people learn about their community and share concerns as they develop stories about their photographs. Photovoice may be a practical and effective approach for Occupational Therapists that want to empower individuals and work toward social change. Overall, OT perspective questions community participation, contexts and the role of occupation for people living with mental illness. Photovoice and OT both value using narrative reasoning to understand the meanings and perspectives of people living with mental illness (Andonian, 2010).

A core value of OT is the influence of occupation on health, well-being and quality of life. Occupational Therapists support the link between occupation, mental health and community through empowerment approaches to support the development of occupational roles for people with mental health issues (Andonian, 2010). OTs need to act as advocates for the greater inclusion of people with mental health issues, to challenge stereotypes and stigma and to remove barriers to participation. OTs focus on the importance of context in promoting occupational engagement. There are few studies that ask people with mental illness issues to describe their day-to-day experiences of community access and participation (Andonian, 2010). Using empowerment approaches for people with mental health issues to help OTs respond to outcome measures identified by participants. Photovoice enables participants to show and describe the context of their experiences, providing relevant evaluations of daily life that can inform OT overall.

As a ‘soon to be’ graduate, I often shy away from the notion of leadership. My first gut reaction is that I believe that I don’t have experience or knowledge, to date, to become the leader in
my clinical practice right from the beginning. After listening to Carrie Clark’s talk about leadership in mental health in OCT1262: Enabling OT with Adults II, I do believe that occupational therapists can make a difference, big or small. Lessons that I have learned from OTs is that we have the ability to identify when things are wrong and need to be right, that we have a natural ability to feel confident to speak up (as this is what we do on a regular basis when promoting our profession), and have the ability to change by adapting to different leadership roles. Drawing from Carrie Clark’s lecture, the LEADS model is an effective tool that we have learned to develop our leadership skills and make change for the better.

As OTs, I find that we are effective in the following stages: leading self, engaging others and achieving results. However, we might fall short when it comes to developing coalitions and system transformation. I believe that photovoice is an excellent method for OTs to use to help engage and improve our skills in these areas. The diagram below represents the process of change for participants (Photovoice, 2007). Drawing on parallels to the LEADS model with relation to the participation change process, as OTs, we are effective in engaging others and “getting (our clients) out there.” We coach and teach our clients to engage with others and get energized to go out into the community, which may be difficult for some individuals living with mental illness. Photovoice helps to provide and creates a way to for these individuals to be heard and validated by other group members as well as by others in the community, which can have a powerful impact on individuals who have low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. By creating and fostering trust in connected relationships, the end results will demonstrate that our clients have experienced personal growth and/or will take on new roles.

However, it does not end here. Connecting clients to their community is important but being a true leader, OTs need to advocate for change. Figure 2 demonstrates the community change process that occurs within a photovoice project.
Again, drawing from the LEADS model, OTs can be effective change agents by developing coalitions and engaging in system transformation. From the photovoice process, the first phase of community exposure is to capture the attention of the public regarding the photovoice project. It is important to build partnerships and networks to create results, such as media exposure, promotional posters, and invitations sent via mail or email to the exhibit, or holding the show in a popular public forum (Photovoice, 2007). To mobilize knowledge, people need to be aware of the project and increase their awareness through the work of the participants. The final stage involves taking action such as developing policy change or future program development. This is where OTs can begin to navigate socio-political environments that are suited to create better health, well-being and justice for their clients.

**Conclusion**

Using photovoice can be an effective way to develop leadership strategies within the OT profession and to transform our practice into one that serves diverse societies and communities. The use of photovoice can be as a method of participatory community assessment, as well as a participatory evaluation. By allowing individuals and communities to speak from their own experience, photovoice can change the quality of discussions both among themselves and those committed to their well-being.

In summary, the following is a list of important take home points:

- Photovoice is a way people with mental illness can share and tell their lived experience and powerful stories through creating a visual language
- It is a method designed to empower members of marginalized groups to work together to identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique
- It is a way for participants to identify and record their community strengths and struggles; explain their experiences through critical reflection and group dialogue; and inform decision-makers and influence policy.

- **Photovoice is an effective leadership tool** for Occupational Therapists to create change towards improving well-being and quality of life of their clients.
References


Appendix A

Relevant Bibliography


Appendix B

Photovoice Guide: A Summary

ACTIVITY: PHOTOVOICES


Photovoice methodology was developed in 1995 by Caroline C. Wang and her colleagues as a means for women living in rural villages in China to communicate important health messages to policymakers. It’s founded in a history of photographic approaches to auto-ethnography and activism. The KLCC II National Evaluation Team used the photovoice methodology as a process for participants to better understand how they came to define the overall concept of their initiatives and the promise and potential of their strategic designs. Even if your evaluation work is nowhere near the national scale, you can use the photovoice methodology to help your group members better understand collective leadership and how it affects their communities and to identify future strategies for community change.

OVERVIEW

This activity demonstrates a grassroots participatory methodology that puts cameras in the hands of community members. It charges these community members with the task of recording and reflecting on their community’s strengths and concerns.

OBJECTIVES

- To recognize and honor the value of participants’ subjective experience
- To “reflect the community back upon itself” and reveal social and political realities
- To facilitate critical and analytical discussion of social conditions and their root cause issues

TIME REQUIRED

Allow a minimum of 4 weeks to disseminate cameras and information, take and develop photos, write narrative descriptions, and reflect on the experience. The process culminates with a full-day (8-hour) group workshop. The full day workshop is where participants can come together and learn collectively from the photovoice experience. There are five parts to this portion of the process:

- Pure appreciation of one another’s’ photos;
- Small-group work to tell a collective story;
- Sharing of story and photo montage;
- Sticky dot process; and
- Full-group discussion to develop a collective story.

ADVANCE PREPARATION
All participants will need to sign a consent form. For the orientation and photo-taking stages, you’ll need to determine some framing questions. Framing questions serve as guidelines for participants in identifying photo subjects that are meaningful for them and address the goals of the project. Provide concise questions that are targeted to the goals of your organization yet broad enough to allow room for participants to explore, share their unique voice, and tell what they think needs to be known.

SUPPLIES

You’ll need disposable cameras, self-addressed postage-paid express envelopes, and copies of the invitation, consent form, photo release form, photovoice ethics and photo reflection sheet for each participant. Poster board and full-sheet labels are optional supplies for mounting and displaying participants’ photos.

For the full-day workshop, you’ll need materials to mount the photos: poster board, double-sided tape, etc. You’ll also need pens, paper, and colored sticky dots (8–10 per participant) for participants. The coloured sticky dots are used to specify a theme or category (i.e., a framing question). The participants place the dots next to the pictures they feel speak best to the overall theme and purpose of the group’s work. You might want to consider arranging video and audio recorders to document the workshop.

POTENTIAL PROBES FOR PHOTO MONTAGES

Clarifying Questions

1. Please tell me more about what’s going on in this picture [may want to point out a particular activity or relationship in the photo].

2. Please tell me more about the people in this picture. Why did you want to focus on them?

3. Tell me more about why you took this picture.

Probing Questions

1. How does this picture (or photo montage) reveal collective leadership? What other leadership activities were you engaged in that you did not present in a photo?

2. I see that this picture highlights a group meeting. How, in light of the photo and your experiences working with this group, do you believe both individual and collective leadership was learned in your group?

3. I see that in this photo, you highlight [insert activity]. Tell me more about this activity and how it created individual leadership skills, collective leadership capacity; bridged differences; created new pathways for community participation, community change, new policies and practices, etc.]

4. What particular partnerships were forged here? Can you explain what’s new about this partnership?
5. If you had taken a similar picture of these people/this activity, say, 5 years before, would the picture show something different?

6. I see that this picture shows [insert place]. Please tell me more about this place and why it’s important to your group’s work (probe for economic, political, cultural context, tensions and concrete group activities that addressed these).

7. What does this photo not show? In light of your photo composition, what impact do you believe that you, as a member of this group, have made on your community? What impact has the collective group made? (Encourage the participants to draw on the photo as they present their response. Probe in the area of finance, culture and language, school-family-community partnerships, education, etc.)

8. How is your photo composition different from and similar to the others in this cluster?

PHOTOVOICE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS & GUIDELINES

Photovoice Ethics: Minimum Best Practice. (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001)

Provide and review with participants a consent form, regardless of whether required by the facilitators’ sponsoring institution

Provide an “Acknowledgment and Release” consent form on which participants obtain the signatures of the people they photograph, regardless of whether required by the facilitators’ sponsoring institution

Frame the first training around a group discussion about the use of cameras, power, and ethics, emphasizing safety and the authority and responsibility that come with using a camera

Provide written material (such as a brochure that describes the goals of the photovoice project, who will participate, how photographs will be used, and whom to contact for more information that participants can give to subjects or interested community members

Provide a letter for youth or adult participants to give teachers and school principals or employers as applicable regarding the goal and duration of the project and establish whether and how cameras will be used at school or work

Provide participants with prints to give back to people they have photographed

Provide and review with participants a consent form indicating permission to publish any photographs, or only specified photographs, to promote project goals, regardless of whether required by the facilitators’ sponsoring institution

Mentor project staff and participants on the ethical principles and actions underlying photovoice
**Stay Safe**
- Don’t take any risks.
- Don’t go anywhere you wouldn’t usually go, or do anything you wouldn’t usually do.
- Take a friend.
- Be aware of what’s around you.

**Be Respectful**
- **Always ask first**, even if this means missing the perfect shot.
- You must have permission before taking pictures of people.
- Remember, the goal is to connect with others and share ideas. Don’t upset people.

**Large Crowds, Landscape or Scenery**
- You do not need a Release Form if people are too small to be recognizable.
- It is still a good idea to ask permission before taking a picture of private property (someone’s house or yard, for example).

**For Pictures with People**
- Have your subjects sign a Release Form before taking any pictures.
- Be especially careful when taking pictures of children. Talk to the parents first, and have a parent sign a Release Form.
- Do not take pictures of people who are “in private”, such as through a window into their home.
- Ask yourself, “Would I mind if someone took a picture of me in this situation?”
- Remember to offer the person a copy of the picture.

Appendix C

A Guide to Sharing Photographs and Eliciting Information

Name of Photographer ________________________________

Title of Picture ___________________________ Date_______

S
“What is Seen here?” (Describe what the eye sees)

H
“What is really Happening?” (The unseen “story” behind the image)

O
“How does this relate to Our lives?” (Or MY life personally)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W</th>
<th>“Why are things this way?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>“How could this image Educate people?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>“What can I Do about it?” (What WILL I or WE do about it?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Appendix D**
Example of Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

The facilitators have my permission to focus observations on my interactions with other participants during the photovoice process.

Yes ____ No _____

The facilitators have my permission to access the photos, photo reflections, and other documents I develop as part of the reporting process.

Yes ____ No _____

The facilitators have my permission to use audiotape and video recording equipment for group and individual conversations during the photovoice process.

Yes ____ No _____

The facilitators have my permission to use audiotapes, video recorders, and photographs that may include me in presentations, as long as they do not identify me by name or through other background information without my consent.

Yes ____ No _____

Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this evaluation.

Participant’s name (PLEASE PRINT):

____________________________________________

Email address: ________________________________

Phone number: ________________________________

_____________________________ __________________________

Participant’s Signature Date
Parent or Guardian Signature
(if participant is under 18)

___________________________  __________________________

Date
Appendix E

A Reflection and Self-Assessment

The ability to self-assess effectively develops over time and with experience. With this in mind, it is helpful for OTs and researchers to select tools and strategies that can be used. In reflection of my own self-learning, I find that journaling is the most effective tools and strategy for self-assessment of both process and product, and allows me to revisit my work at a later date, engage in reflection and set goals for my own improvement. The great thing about journaling is that it can be an effective cost effective way to record our learning and track it over time.

While completing my research project during my undergraduate degree at Ryerson, I kept a journal of the things I wanted to reflect on during the research process. Today, I would like to share a few of the entries that highlighted how photovoice and the participants gave me a unique and enriched experience.

**Hands and Photographs- entry March 2008**

I had an amazing feeling of being a researcher sitting in a room with these students that I had never met before doing this project and learning in such detail the things that they enjoy about school. I could not believe that these photographs would open up such discussion around student life. In all of my interviews, the students handed the photographs over to me to flip through. It was such a sharing and engaging time that it reminded me of all the times I have been on vacation and shared my pictures to friends and family. We all sit close, open ears to listen to the stories but our eyes are actively participating. The listener often gets the privilege to hold the photographs while the storyteller sits and points to what is being shown. In my interviews this is how it happened. I had the privilege of holding the pictures and I strongly felt a sense of connection to their stories through the visual encounters. The power of sharing these pictures was truly evident. These participants were complete strangers, but I felt a bond to them as they recalled their personal accounts of their lives as students with disabilities.

**Finding their voice- entry April 2008**

I found interviewing the student participants rather interesting and I have gained new perspective about each student way of living. Frank was my first student I interviewed. He was a really easygoing guy with a sense of humour larger than life. He willingly disclosed and shared his experiences around his disability. He had mentioned that this was the first time that he told ‘a
stranger’ the full extent of his illness. Even though he did have special accommodation through the school, he did not want to disclose his disability to his teachers in fear that he would be treated differently. I was surprised at Frank’s easy going nature- was it the sharing of photographs that helped?

Pictures do in fact evoke stories and a part of those stories are about the lived experience of people like Frank. All of the student participants really did want to share something important to them and the meanings behind the photos-without judgment, stereotypes or feeling stigmatized during the process. During our interviews, they did most of the talking and I poked in for a question or two when I was interested in learning more about them. This was their time to share and to explore what they felt was important for others to know about being a student at Ryerson and what living with a disability means to them.