Using Methods That Matter: The Impact of Reflection, Dialogue, and Voice

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In recent years, the field of community psychology has given considerable attention to how research and evaluation methods should be designed to support our goals of empowerment and social justice. Yet, as a field, we have given much less attention to whether the use of our methods actually achieves or supports our empowerment agenda. With the primary purpose of beginning to establish the norm of reporting on the impacts of our methods, this paper reports on the findings from interviews of 16 youth and adults who had participated in one participatory evaluation method (Photovoice). Two specific questions were examined: (1) What is the impact of participating in a Photovoice effort; and (2) How does the method of Photovoice foster these impacts? Overall, participants noted that they were significantly affected by their experiences as photographers and through their dialogue with neighbors during Photovoice group sessions. Impacts ranged from an increased sense of control over their own lives to the emergence of the kinds of awareness, relationships, and efficacy supportive of participants becoming community change agents. According to participants, Photovoice fostered these changes by (a) empowering them as experts on their lives and community, (b) fostering deep reflection, and (c) creating a context safe for exploring diverse perspectives. The implications of these findings for the science and practice of community psychology are discussed.

KEY WORDS: participatory methods; Photovoice; comprehensive community initiatives; empowerment; research methods.

With these pictures we're telling a story ... the pictures that you're taking are telling your story—that your life is important. Just in taking the pictures it gets you involved, you know, looking at your life and what's good about it, what's bad about it, what things need to be changed. And, you know, the same things about your community. You look at your community and say, 'What could I do to make my community better?' (Battle Creek Photovoice Participant)

The cornerstone of community psychology is the science of action. We strive to hold ourselves accountable, not just to the creation of knowledge for knowledge's sake, but also to the creation of knowledge for the sake of its utility (Heller, 1990; Kelly, 2003; Price & Behrens, 2003). As a community of scientists committed to enhancing the quality of life for all citizens, the utility and impact of our findings stand center stage in our assessments of worthwhile research. To this end, we recognize that the act of engaging in scientific inquiry is not, by its nature, necessarily a benevolent process. Research processes and findings have great potential for harm as well as good (e.g., Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). Hence, as responsible scientists, we have cautioned ourselves to consider the potential iatrogenic effects of our work (Rappaport, 1990). Central to this stance is our recognition that our methods should support, not undermine, our overall aims of empowerment and social justice (Kelly, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2001; Rappaport, 1990).

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While we have given considerable attention to how our methods should be designed to support these goals (i.e., using collaborative, participatory approaches to inquiry that enhance participant power over the research process and ensure that research is guided by the emic perspective), we have given much less attention to whether the use of such methods achieves these ends. In other words, while many of us are now intentionally designing and employing methods that we assume to be empowering to participants (e.g., Kelly, Moch, & Tandon, 2001; Rappaport, 1998; Wandersman, 1999), the actual impact of these methods has not yet been empirically explored. Just as Kelly (2003) argues that explicit attention to the contextual constraints of our methods must be considered to move our field forward, we argue that a similar explicit exploration of the impact of our methods is needed to further promote the science and practice of community psychology.

The generation of such knowledge seems critical for several reasons. First, it supports the emerging recognition that our methods do have impacts upon the communities within which we work irrespective of whether such impacts are an intentional part of our research designs. To date, this argument has rested mainly on the philosophical claims that have been used to support alternative epistemological and methodological positions (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990). An explicit analysis of the impact of our research methodologies will help to move this discussion beyond the question of "Does our research have an impact?" to "In what ways are individuals and communities impacted by our research?" Such an examination seems particularly apt to the field of community psychology because its ecological emphasis includes a focus on the transactional nature of relationships (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Wicker, 1987), including the transactions inherent in the researcher–researched relationship (Stewart, 2000).

Second, attention to the impact of our research methods causes us to consider the utility of research methodologies as intentional forms of intervention within a community change agenda. To date, there have been many calls for community psychologists to adopt methods or approaches that are socially useful (e.g., Heller, 1990), such as collaborative or participatory approaches that are designed to meet community needs, answer local questions, consider insider concerns, and fit with the local ways of knowledge production (e.g., Kelly et al., 2001). Many of these approaches overtly support an empowerment agenda designed to include participants in the knowledge generation process from defining the questions to collecting and interpreting the data (Rappaport, 1990). Their social usefulness is therefore defined, in part, by their assumed impact on participants; yet, empirically, we know little about the impact and subsequent utility of such participatory strategies.

The purpose of this article is not to argue for the legitimacy or value of participatory approaches, that argument has been well established elsewhere (see Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor, & Davis, 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). Instead, the purpose of the present study is to explore the impact of one participatory research strategy—Photovoice—on the youth and adults who participated in this endeavor, as well as the potential aspects of participation that led to these impacts.

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

With the growing recognition that knowledge is power (e.g., Carmen, 1996; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001), scientists across a range of disciplines are increasingly using participatory research methods that strive to promote participant ownership and control over the knowledge generation process (e.g., Jason et al., 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donahue, 2003). In these approaches, the role of the researcher is often framed as that of a facilitator of knowledge creation, assisting stakeholders in discovering their own understandings that will aid them in creating change (e.g., Green & Mercer, 2001; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). This body of research methods is largely based on Freire's (1970) demonstration that helping individuals to gain access to information and to develop an increased understanding of the societal issues that impact their lives are fundamental tools for community change. Overall, participatory approaches are viewed as favorable, in part, because of their potential for promoting participant control over what knowledge is generated and how that knowledge is used; participatory methods may also foster learning via reflection and action (e.g., Balcazar, Taylor, & Kielhofner, 2004; Carmen, 1996; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001).

Given this attention to the promotion of participant control and learning, the above suggests that one useful framework for understanding the potential impact of participatory methods, and one that is

congruent with the intended aims of community psychology, is empowerment theory. According to empowerment theory, a research or evaluation method is an empowering process when it offers an opportunity for action and reflection that fosters the progressive development of participatory skills and political understandings (e.g., Freire, 1973; Keiffer, 1984; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1998). This suggests that one approach to assessing the impact of our methods is to determine if, and how, they are experienced as an empowering process by participants.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STUDY

Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994) is an innovative participatory research method that incorporates the process of documentary photography with the practice of empowerment education (Freire, 1970). It puts cameras in the hands of individuals often excluded from decision-making processes in order to capture their voices and visions about their lives, their community, and their concerns (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996). By sharing their stories about these images, reflecting with others about the broader meanings of the photos they have taken, and displaying these photos and stories for the broader public and policy makers to view, Photovoice participants are provided with a unique opportunity to document and communicate important aspects of their lives.

To date, Photovoice has been used with rural Chinese women (Wang et al., 1996), homeless adults (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000), low-income and homeless African-American women (Killon & Wang, 2000), refugee youth from Bosnia (Berman, Ford-Bilboe, Moutrey, & Cekic, 2001), children living in poverty in Appalachia (Ewald, 1985), persons with disabilities (Bowers, 1999), immigrant workers (Gallo, 2002), and youth and adults living in concentrated poverty (e.g., Spears, 1999). As a participatory research methodology, Photovoice has proven itself to be a highly flexible tool for carrying out needs assessments, asset mapping, and participatory program evaluations (Wang, 1999). For example, in a seminal project conducted with women from rural villages in China, Wang and colleagues (Wang et al., 1996) used photographs and documented reflections provided by village women as a vehicle for educating women on their own health needs as well as informing Chinese policy makers and the broader society about the health and community issues faced

by rural women. In another study by Berman and colleagues (Berman et al., 2001), Photovoice was used to capture the experiences and daily challenges faced by a group of Bosnian refugee youth who had re-settled in Canada. While these previous efforts have provided ample documentation of Photovoice as an effective method for gaining emic perspectives, capturing voices that are often excluded, and informing policy (Wang, 2003), we know little about the impact that Photovoice has on the participants themselves.

In some ways, Photovoice is similar to the narrative approaches to inquiry described by Rappaport and his colleagues (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport, 1995, 2000; Rappaport & Simkins, 1991). Narrative or story telling processes aim to capture the stories people tell about their lives because these stories are viewed as a useful venue for understanding the meaning and significance behind lived experience (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport, 1995, 2000; Rappaport & Simkins, 1991; Salzer, 1998). More specifically, in a narrative approach, stories are viewed as important cognitive mechanisms in that they "organize experience, give coherence and meaning to life events, and provide a sense of continuity, history, and of the future" (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000, p. 481). In fact, some have argued that all important information, including what we know about who we are, who we were, and who we can become is stored and retrieved in storied form (Rappaport, 1998; Schank, 1990; Schank & Abelson, 1995). While Photovoice does not aim to capture a full narrative about community life, the process of having individuals tell the story or describe the meaning behind the photos they take does provide a glimpse into their social realities and provides insights into related broader community and cultural narratives (Rappaport, 1998).

Overall, the Photovoice methodology is an excellent venue for examining the impact of participatory methods on participants as it combines a variety of techniques which engage participants in ongoing reflection about their social world. Such active reflection is considered critical to fostering an empowering process (e.g., Keiffer, 1984). As such, the present study examines the impact of this method on youth and adults who participated in a Photovoice project during the summer of 2002. Two research questions guided this inquiry: (1) What is the impact of participating in Photovoice? and (2) How does the method of Photovoice foster these impacts?

METHOD

Study Context

In the spring of 2002, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) launched a comprehensive community building initiative (*Yes we can*!) in the city of Battle Creek, Michigan (population approximately 53,000 [2000 Census]). The primary goal of this initiative was to use resident-driven strategies to improve education and economic outcomes in the city of Battle Creek. Seven distressed neighborhoods (i.e., characterized by high levels of poverty and poor educational outcomes for youth) were the initial partners in this effort. Similar to other place-based community initiatives, phase 1 of "*Yes we can*!" (YWC!) involved community-building efforts aimed at developing social capital within the neighborhoods. Two key community building activities were pursued: (a) neighborhood-based community developers (called Connectors) were hired to foster sense of community, local leadership, and linkages to existing community resources, and (b) small mini-grants were made available for resident-designed neighborhood improvement projects (see Foster-Fishman et al. (under review) for a more detailed description of this effort). The authors were members of the team hired to evaluate *Yes we can*!.

The nature of the initiative and the context within which the evaluation was conducted created important dynamics that needed to be considered in designing an appropriate evaluation approach. First, due to the resident-driven emphasis of YWC!, it was recognized that the residents themselves would be important consumers of the information sought. Bolstering community awareness and understanding of neighborhood conditions and indigenous mechanisms for change was viewed as an essential component to supporting resident empowerment and providing residents with the tools and capabilities they would need to engage in change efforts. Second, due to a history of neglect and disenfranchisement across the seven neighborhoods, it was recognized early on that residents were likely to be distrustful of outsiders and that traditional methods of data collection were apt to be perceived as invasive by some residents. Overall, given that more conventional approaches to evaluation (i.e., focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys) sometimes augment a distressed community's sense of powerlessness (Wang, 2003) and limit the frame of understanding to what is already within the public discourse (Chavez,

Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2003) or within the language of the researcher, it seemed imperative that we identify additional means for understanding life within these neighborhoods.

Photovoice Implementation

Given the need for the evaluation to generate new understandings, ensure resident voice, build community capacity, and support the initiative's goals of resident empowerment, participatory research methods were incorporated into the overall evaluation design Photovoice appeared to be an excellent fit with the values and needs of the project and was implemented as part of the first year data collection strategies.

In this Photovoice project, 11 youth and 18 adults from seven different neighborhoods were brought together in groups of up to six other residents from their own neighborhood. The goals for the project were to promote reflection and discourse among residents regarding neighborhood and community life as well as to collect qualitative evaluation data from residents regarding what life is like in these neighborhoods. Consistent with the asset-based approach of YWC!, we were particularly interested in understanding what residents valued or felt was good about their lives, what they felt needed to change, and how they thought change happens or could happen.

The implementation of the YWC! Photovoice project was as follows. First, YWC! Connectors actively recruited potential Photovoice participants through word-of-mouth, advertisements in community newsletters, and the distribution of flyers in the seven targeted neighborhoods and at neighborhood events. Based on selection criteria provided by the evaluation team, Connectors strived to recruit up to seven residents from each neighborhood in which (a) approximately half were youth, (b) approximately half were female, and (c) participants represented the ethnic diversity within each neighborhood. These residents were invited to attend a 2-day orientation and training session and were compensated $50 for participating in this training. During this session residents received instruction on basic photography techniques and were oriented to the purpose and process of Photovoice. Because participating in Photovoice was an unfamiliar experience requiring a substantial investment of time and effort on the part of

participants (i.e., possibly five or more hours a week) this training was designed to teach them about the process and to then allow them to decide if they would be willing to participate. Of the 42 individuals who attended this orientation session, 31 individuals elected to participate in Photovoice. Two of these individuals eventually dropped out due to conflicts with school, work, or other summer activities. In the end, 29 individuals participated in this Photovoice project including 11 youth and 18 adults.

The Photovoice project itself lasted for 5 weeks. During each week, participants would shoot a role of film that was then developed and returned to them before the end of that week. Participants were given significant latitude and freedom to express what they felt was important in their photos, but were asked to focus their photography and reflections around answering the following three questions: (a) "What is your life like?," (b) "What is good about your life?," and (c) "What needs to change?."

Each week, after receiving their developed film, participants would select three images they felt were particularly meaningful and would write reflections about each photograph in response to the following questions: (a) "I want to share this photo because . . .," (b) "What's the real story this photo tells?," and (c) "How does this story relate to your life and/or the lives of people in your neighborhood?" Participants brought these written reflections with them to weekly reflective sessions where they met with up to 6 other participants from their neighborhood. Group sizes ranged from 2 to 7 participants with an average size of 4 members per group. The meetings were facilitated by one of three evaluation team members.

At the beginning of each session, participants shared their interpretations and thoughts regarding the meaning and significance of their own selected images. Group members would then jointly select up to five photos to discuss as a group. Photos selected for group dialogue were chosen through a voting process in which each participant voted on up to three photos they wished to discuss further. Groups then participated in a facilitated dialogue about the selected photos, examining their meaning and implications for neighborhood life and change. Participants were paid $25 each week they attended the group reflection meeting.

As a participatory qualitative methodology, findings from this Photovoice project provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of residents residing within the participating low-income neighborhoods, particularly with regards to the meaning

and significance residents ascribe to the neighborhood and community conditions that surround them. For example, photographs and reflections revealed the impact of positive and negative neighborhood conditions on local youth and adults and highlighted indigenous mechanisms for change. (see Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, & Foster-Fishman (under review) for a more detailed description of the findings). Furthermore, while this Photovoice project also involved a community wide photo exhibit, this paper only attends to the impacts of participating as a photographer and in the weekly sessions.

Participants

The population sampled for this study consisted of the 29 individuals who participated in the YWC! Photovoice project. Because it was important to YWC! staff and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that requests for data from residents were kept to a minimum, we elected to interview approximately half of the Photovoice participants for this study. To ensure that our sample was representative of the diversity present amongst all Photovoice participants, we developed a stratified sample that included a representative mix of adults and youth, low (attended two or three out of the five sessions) and high (attended at least four of the five sessions) involvement participants, and individuals representing the overall participants' racial backgrounds and targeted neighborhoods. Using the aforementioned criteria, 17 out of the original 29 participants were selected and contacted. Four individuals declined to participate due to scheduling conflicts and 4 participants who matched these individuals on selection criteria were then invited to participate. One individual could not be reached, resulting in a sample size of 16.

Of the 16 participants, 55% were African-American, 16% were Latino, and 29% were Caucasian; 63% of the participants were adults and 52% were female. All seven neighborhoods were represented in this sample. Finally, 84% of the participants were classified as being highly active in Photovoice. Overall, this sample closely represented the characteristics of the overall Photovoice participant group.

Procedure

Three months after the Photovoice project, letters were mailed to all participants notifying them

that they may receive a telephone call requesting an interview. The letter also explained that they were not obligated to participate, but offered $10 as compensation for their time if they chose to be interviewed. Interviewers contacted selected participants by telephone and agreed on a suitable place for the interview.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to examine our two research questions. To understand the impact of participating in Photovoice, individuals were first asked about the experience of participating in Photovoice (e.g., What was it like to be a Photovoice photographer? To talk about your photos with other people from your neighborhood?), and then about project impact (e.g., Did you find you were affected in any way by your participation in Photovoice? How? Did participating in Photovoice change the way you see your community? In what ways?). To explore how Photovoice fostered these changes, participants were asked to describe how their involvement in Photovoice led to these impacts. To ensure that we adequately understood participants' experiences in each of these domains, interviewers probed extensively.

Nine graduate students conducted the interviews.[4] To reduce potential bias in informant responses, students that did not facilitate Photovoice sessions conducted the interviews. All students participated in the construction of the protocol and were trained by the first author in interviewing techniques. Interviews were held at the YWC! project office, participants' homes, or a local restaurant. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 min, with an average length of 45 min. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and imported into *Atlas.ti* for data management and coding purposes.

Data Analysis

All interviews were analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach to identify underlying themes across informants (Patton, 2002). Consistent with an inductive approach, the research team refrained from conducting a formal review of the literature prior to data analysis as doing so may "bias the

researcher's thinking and reduce openness to whatever emerges in the field" (Patton, 2002, p. 226). Instead, the research team used two research questions to guide the development of the coding framework: (a) What was the experience of Photovoice like for participants? and (b) In what ways did participants describe being impacted by their participation in Photovoice? Using an iterative coding process to identify an initial set of codes, all of the authors read the same transcript and independently identified possible themes and codes in the data. This initial open coding process allowed for the emergence of patterns, themes, and categories. The coding team then compared codes to create an initial coding framework. Following the development of this initial framework, each transcript was independently coded by two of the authors. Coding pairs then discussed their codes, identified and resolved areas of disagreement, and created a final coding scheme for each transcript. The entire research team met regularly to clarify and revise the coding framework as work progressed and the need for revision was evident. Using this process, a final conceptual framework was developed and, to ensure its applicability, each transcript was recoded against this framework using the same process as described earlier. As part of this last step, convergent and disconfirming evidence for the final framework was sought from each transcript (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This coding approach, similar to a modified grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), helped to ensure that the final coding framework reflected our emergent understanding of the data and the participants' perspectives—not our a priori hypotheses about their experiences.

In an effort to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, some of the criteria recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1989) were followed. Peer debriefing was used to increase the credibility of our findings. Our team met frequently to examine and critique our process and to develop and test hypotheses. In addition, to determine the robustness of our final framework, we compared the pattern of themes that emerged within all cases to determine if our final framework fit for the different age groups, racial groups, and participation levels present within our sample. We found that the themes presented in our framework were salient for all of these demographic groups. In the end, the trustworthiness of the final conceptual model was significantly enhanced by having two researchers independently extract themes from each transcript and by verifying the

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[4] All nine graduate students became involved in data collection for this research as part of their curriculum for a qualitative methods course. Seven out of the nine students were female. Approximately three quarters (77%) were Caucasian with the remaining students being African-American.

final model against all transcripts. Key insider corroboration (by YWC! staff, several Photovoice participants, and Photovoice staff facilitators) also enhanced the authenticity of our conclusions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

RESULTS

Overall, all participants noted that they were significantly affected by their experiences as photographers and through their dialogue with neighbors during Photovoice group sessions. These impacts ranged from an increased sense of competence to the emergence of the kinds of awareness, relationships, and efficacy supportive of participants becoming community change agents. As we examined the themes that had emerged across participants in conjunction with our reviews of the literature on empowerment, it became evident that participating in Photovoice engendered what Keiffer (1984) refers to as participatory competence: "the combination of attitudes, understandings, and abilities required to play a conscious and assertive role in the ongoing social construction of one's political environment" (p. 31). While Keiffer's framework was not used to guide our content analysis, the emergent framework we developed from this data fit well with the components of participatory competence as detailed by Keiffer, and for that reason, we use his terms to label our themes. Specifically, across participants three main types of impacts were identified: (a) increased self-competence, (b) emergent critical awareness of one's environment, and (c) the cultivation of resources for social and political action.

Increased Self-Competence

According to the Photovoice participants, as they engaged in the process of documenting important aspects of their lives and communicating the meaning behind their photographs in a group setting with previously unknown others, they discovered strengths and capacities within themselves that had, until that time, gone unnoticed. In particular, participants described how they became confident in their ability to communicate and take control of their own lives. For example, several participants talked about their increased ability to effectively communicate with others as a result of their participation in Photovoice:

> I didn't want to talk in front of everybody, but I did like it because it made me feel like I can do this, I can do that. [Now] . . . I'm more open. It's easier for me to communicate with others, and they made me feel like I'm a creative person. I can express myself.

For some, the recognition of these new capabilities was inspiring. For example, one participant reported her surprise at how well she was able to communicate with others in the weekly group sessions in a way she never had before: "I was very comfortable. It was amazing how I could speak about the pictures. I was impressed with myself." This participant, with her newfound confidence and the support she received within her group session, said she began working toward her GED certificate as a result of her Photovoice participation.

> Before all I did was church, school, kids, and before I didn't do anything. It [Photovoice] was good experience. I [got to] know a lot of people and even push myself and go [return] to school . . . I'm going to try so hard, you know. This will allow me to have a better life.

Other participants similarly reflected on Photovoice as a process that fostered in them an increased sense of self-confidence and an expanded sense of what they could accomplish. For example, one youth described how participating in Photovoice helped him develop a greater sense of his own ability to take control of his life.

> I found out that if you sort of take control in your own hands you can do a lot more than just sitting back and complaining, and not really doing anything, being upset about the way that things are [in your life]. If you try to take that in your own hands, then you can get a lot farther and that sort of helped me . . . I've been able to take control more, so I think [Photovoice] really helped me with that.

For some other participants, Photovoice helped them realize that they could have a voice in their community by sharing their concerns. Through the process of taking photographs and telling their stories, participants began to realize that these were potent tools for helping others see and understand the realities of neighborhood life. For example, one youth photographer commented that participating in Photovoice made her realize her own power, giving her more confidence to speak out about the problems in her community:

> I went around my neighborhood and took pictures of stuff that I didn't want to go on . . . because I don't

like it...I wanna do something that can prevent it—so it can stop. We won't let drugs or anything like that be on my street or anywhere else around the neighborhood ... [Photovoice] is makin' me feel more powerful so, next time I see this, I can be like 'hey, hold it.' It gave me a lot of courage to tell people what I feel inside.

Emergent Critical Awareness of Their Environment

All participants described developing an expanded awareness of circumstances and conditions within their communities that they may have previously overlooked. Through their own explorations, as well as through hearing the stories and seeing the photos taken by others, participants described becoming more knowledgeable about their community. This awareness happened on two levels: (a) some individuals developed an expanded understanding of their surroundings, seeing their community, neighborhood and neighbors in a way they never had before, and (b) some participants developed a critical consciousness about their community, attending to what was wrong and what could and should be changed.

Expanded Understanding of Their Environment

Some participants described themselves as people who, as a result of Photovoice, pay more attention to their surroundings and now understand their community in a more complete way. This increased awareness emerged around several aspects of community life. First, some participants described how Photovoice opened their eyes to characteristics present within their environments.

> I learned that there's poverty, there's broken down houses in the community, but I [also] started to realize the nice things—the nice yards, the nice kept places. So, that's pretty much what I learned.

> [Photovoice] made me look at [my community] more as a whole ... you look at these couple of houses all the time and you never notice the other houses ... You're like, 'I never took the time to look over there.' Now, you just look around more.

> You know, I [have] been here 33 years and there's a lot of things about [my community] that I had no clue—[Right] there under my nose and I did not know about it. A lot of it came out in these meetings. Different people took different things and we talked about it.

Second, through the process of reflecting on their photos participants also gained an increased insight into the implications of neighborhood and community conditions for those who live around them. For example, one participant talked about a photo he took of a tree sapling that was growing amidst a pile of garbage. This sapling became a metaphor that allowed him to explore his own concern for children growing up in his neighborhood surrounded by drugs, poverty, and violence:

> When I found the little sapling ... I took [the picture] the way I seen it but [in doing so] I discovered the way I seen it ... Cause like if you are over eighteen you can be strong about [the neighborhood] and just hopefully black it out and work around it, but kids, they don't. There's nothing they can really do about it 'cause they live there.

Third, participating in weekly reflection meetings with others from their neighborhood provided participants with an opportunity to discover some of the multiple realities and perspectives present within their community. Participants noted how hearing the diversity of perspectives expressed by their neighbors expanded their understandings of community life and even, for some, helped them construct more complex understandings of their social world:

> I did learn from a lot of other people's perspectives. Everybody can look at the same thing and see something totally different. I didn't go in looking for that, but that's what I came out with.

> We would talk about the pictures that we took and what we thought, each of us individually, what we were trying to get across. And it was really good because you got to see everybody's point of view of their neighborhood on the situation and it sort of opened your eyes.

Perhaps most importantly, by learning about the diversity present within their neighborhoods, some participants also began to develop an understanding of what they shared in common with others residents in their community:

> We got to know everybody and I know how other people's neighborhoods and everything was. [That] was cool because they was basically going through the same thing you going through.

> [I discovered] everybody is kind of looking for the same thing. Everybody kind of wants the same thing out of [life]. The same things bother people—the graffiti on the walls and the graffiti on the parks and the things that are destroyed for no reason.

Elevated Critical Consciousness

For some participants, this increased awareness of neighborhood and community conditions, as well as the development of a shared understanding about the implications of these conditions, evolved into an action-oriented critical consciousness. Specifically, neighborhood and community conditions that were previously viewed as part of everyday reality were now viewed through a frame that "things needed to change." Therefore, instead of accepting negative conditions as natural or beyond their control, participants became increasingly critical of these circumstances.

> [Before Photovoice} I was staying at home or kicked it with my friends. Now I'm like okay, even to this day I see stuff and like 'Whoa! That needs to be changed,' you know. This project just put that type of impact on me…I was affected by [Photovoice] just because I never really paid attention and that really … well, ok, I was paying attention but I never really noticed what [I] was paying attention to … Now I notice a lot of things that I probably wouldn't notice before or really pay attention to. I might have seen it, turned my head, and think nothing of it. Now, it's like the project put that in me where ok, I see, I notice it—it needs to be changed.

> Before [Photovoice] I was just doing my everyday thing, wasn't even thinking about it. And then, once I started the program, some thoughts got into my head—like, 'it does gotta be changed, some things have gotta be changed around here.'

The Cultivation of Resources for Social and Political Action

In addition to developing new competencies and an expanded critical awareness of their community, Photovoice fostered, for some participants, the development of several individual and collective resources that could support social and political action. These included an enhanced relational network, an increased awareness of change processes, and a strengthened commitment to their community. Some participants were able to draw upon these increased resources and become change agents themselves.

Enhanced Relational Networks

The process of getting out and exploring the community with cameras, as well as participating in group reflection sessions seemed to engender the formation and deepening of relationships among participants and between participants and other community members. Participants reported developing several new friendships with other Photovoice participants and, for some, these relationships enhanced their sense of belonging to their community. As one woman described:

> I had a good time and made good friends. I'm proud of that because you meet somebody and you can talk to them and be friends. You live in the same city and you don't know when you're going to meet.

Participants also noted that the weekly photographic processes provided them with an unusual chance to connect with other members of their community. As they ventured out into their community, their new roles as photographers often provided participants with opportunities to speak to others with whom they did not have previous relationships. While many such connections were fleeting, there were cases in which the groundwork for the development of new relationships was laid. This impact was particularly significant as participants often described their neighborhoods as lacking in a strong sense of community and relationships between neighbors:

> I met people here, and people like out on the street. People around my neighborhood, my neighbors, people like that. I didn't really get to talk to my neighbors [before] … we wasn't like seein' eye to eye together, 'cause there's a lot a different things goin' around our neighborhood, so they don't come out they house. They like to [stay to] they self. So I go to their house, knock on their door, and then, you know, now we are friends.

> I have lived in [my neighborhood] for 14 years and a lot of the people I now know I met right here [through Photovoice]. Like Lucy, she lives right down the street from me and I had seen her before but I did not know her name and I didn't really know where she lived. She's a good friend now [because of Photovoice]. I have met about 50 people that I had seen in the area but I did not know that they lived on my street or adjacent street.

Increased Awareness of Change Processes

For some participants, the ongoing opportunity for critical reflection and dialogue about neighborhood life and current neighborhood improvement efforts led to an increased understanding of what needs to happen in order for change to occur. For example, several residents talked about how they

discovered the significance of building relationships and working together as levers for improving their community.

> I mean, when you see different communities improving, people [are] getting involved, you know? Your neighbors are getting involved. You guys become friendly and that's how friendships develop. You cannot have a friendship with anyone if you just stay in the house or if you don't care to get to know somebody because of their race. That, to me, just irks me. When I moved over here I did not realize [things] were like this.

> [I discovered that] everybody, given a chance, would like to do something good for others as well as for their community. We are all human beings, but in a sense we are strangers to each other and a community should not be like that. We should get to know each other and we should rely on each other's strength and strengthen each other's weakness.

Others learned about the importance of small wins in promoting community change:

> We talked about [neighborhood change] in Photovoice with the pictures and showing how you can do one little thing and that gives you success. Do another thing and it gives you success and you can start building until maybe you eventually will get it . . . that big thing that you want to do.

Increased Commitment to Community

Photovoice also seemed to nurture, in some, an increased awareness of the need to be the caretakers of their own community. Participants described feeling an increased sense of ownership of their community and a sense of responsibility for making their community better.

> [I discovered] that we can do better. Sometimes you would throw garbage out of your car and now you just keep in your pocket and throw it in the trash . . . I'm thinking that I can do much better for the community.

> I didn't see it really [as] isolated but I did not feel that I was really a part of the community. I live there but I was not part of the community. But now, through [Photovoice], people are calling me for help, they[are] calling me to ask suggestions, ask ideas. So, it has really, I feel that I am part of the community now. Whereas before I lived here but I was not really involved, but now I am. So, it has really—I feel that I am now part of this community. This is my community.

Emergent Involvement as a Change Agent

One of the most noteworthy impacts that resulted from participation in Photovoice was the development of some participants into change agents. These participants moved beyond a critical awareness of the need for positive change to occur within their community or an awareness of their own ability to potentially create change to actually taking personal action in order to affect such change.

One example of this was a participant who, during the first week of Photovoice, photographed an abandoned building in her neighborhood that was overgrown with weeds and covered in graffiti. During her reflection that week, she shared her negative feelings about the building and discussed its effect on her neighborhood. Four weeks later, the same participant brought in another photo of the same building that was now cleaned up as part of a neighborhood beautification project she had organized:

> I just kind of got tired of looking at it, and after talking about it [during the Photovoice group meeting] I went and spoke to the man that owned the place and said, 'look, this is just horrid, if you buy the paint, I'll paint it.'

Another participant shared a similar example of community involvement. While out walking around her neighborhood with her camera, she noticed a house that had fallen into disrepair. She relayed this story in the following way:

> I was just walking around the neighborhood taking pictures, and I don't know, this [house] was not quite dilapidated but it needed a little help. The car was outside and it wasn't that good so I went up and knocked on the door. I'm glad I did because they turned out to be a really nice elderly couple and they don't have a lot of friends. I saw that their house needed repairing and I told what I could do to help them and they let me in and we sat down and talked for about 45 min. [Now] I take them to meetings, I take him to the doctor if he needs transportation and he told me about another neighbor that lives across the street that I do the same thing for. I'll be retiring from school soon so I'm going to really get more involved with helping people in the area.

Since participating in Photovoice, both of the above participants have emerged as recognized resident leaders in their neighborhoods and are now helping to organize groups of neighbors to develop projects aimed at neighborhood improvement.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PHOTOVOICE PROCESS

One question that emerged from the above findings is, "How did Photovoice foster the emergence of these participatory competences and resources for social change?" We engaged in two analytic processes to answer this question. First, two Photovoice facilitators each independently engaged in a reflection process to identify those elements of the method that, from their perspective, had the most effect on participants. In addition, during their interviews, participants spoke about Photovoice and how different parts of this method affected them. Data from both sources converged on three aspects of the Photovoice methodology that appear to have been instrumental in creating the kinds of impacts discussed: (a) Photovoice empowered participants as experts on their lives and community, (b) Photovoice fostered deep reflection about participants' lives and experiences, and (c) Photovoice created a safe climate for exploring diverse perspectives. Below we describe these experiences and the techniques used within our Photovoice process to encourage these experiences.

Empowered as Experts

Proponents of participatory research methods argue that nobody knows more about the lived experience of a neighborhood than those who actually live in it (e.g., Balcazar et al., 2004). Yet, in order for participants to have the capacity to share their expertise, they must recognize that their indigenous knowledge and experience is legitimate, valued, and valuable (Kelly & Van Vlaenderen, 1995). We believe that Photovoice empowered participants to acknowledge and share their expertise in three important ways.

First, *a strong normative stance* that "your story is important and your life is of value" was conveyed to participants at multiple times and in varied ways throughout the project. In the initial Photovoice orientation and during group sessions, participants were continually reminded that "what you have to share and say is important." They were informed that the purpose of Photovoice was to provide them with the skills and opportunity to communicate with policy makers and their community. They were shown examples from other Photovoice projects conducted all over the world to support the assertion that everyday people have important things to say. Overall, it is believed that this normative stance created a context where participants felt like their lives were meaningful and valuable. For example, one participant had the following to say about her role as a Photovoice photographer:

> With these pictures we're telling a story . . . the pictures that you're taking are telling your story—that your life is important.

The *non-evaluative and non-judgmental climate* created within group sessions was believed to be critical to promoting participants' confidence in communicating their knowledge about their lives. Photos were not evaluated for their photographic merit, and facilitators worked to set norms that recognized every story and photo as representative of something important. Many participants indicated how important it was that "there were no bad photos" and that "every photo was important; every story had value":

> Nobody made fun of your pictures, your story behind it. It was fun. It was comfortable.

> It was really friendly. You really didn't feel like if you said something that people would laugh at you or that they would say that you was stupid or anything like that. Everybody was pretty open-minded, so it was just feeling that comfort.

Second, we believe that *the process of giving participants complete narrative autonomy* in capturing and selecting the images they wanted to share and in determining the stories they wanted others to hear empowered them to tell their story *as they wanted it told*. In this Photovoice project, the only guidance participants were given regarding the content of their photos and narrative was to focus their photography and reflections around answering the following questions: (a) What is your life like? (b) What is good about your life? and (c) What needs to change? These broad questions provided participants significant latitude in selecting the subjects of their photos and in describing their meaning. Participants selected the images they wanted to share and the images they wanted to highlight within the group discussion. As stated by one participant, having complete control over what they wanted to share was experienced as significant because:

> It gave everybody a voice, you know. We all could actually go in there and say what we wanted to say and people would listen and so that was the best thing.

Third, we believe that *the visual photographic element* of Photovoice provided participants with both a *tangible means for communicating* their message and *an indelible image* of their experiences. Having photos of their lives, communities, and neighborhoods seemed to provide participants with a visible means of describing salient aspects of their lives:

> Honestly I felt a little powerful because we could actually show what we were talking about or what we really wanted to be changed. And a picture, you can't change a picture after you take it, you know what I'm saying? I mean it's some kind of sense of power to me…Growing up where I did I've notice these things ever since I was a kid … Doing this made it possible so I could say what I wanted to say . …

Fostered Deep Reflection

Although Photovoice participants had a wealth of experience in community life, the transformation of this experiential knowledge into critical consciousness requires time and occasion for personal reflection (Freire, 1973). It is believed that the opportunity to reflect on their lives and to examine their experiences and neighborhoods in new and deeper ways encouraged participants to come to their own understandings and interpretations about things that mattered to them. Several strategies were employed in the Photovoice project to support this reflection process.

First, constant *focus on the same set of framing questions* (e.g., What is your life like? What needs to change?) throughout the 5-week project gave the participants extended opportunities to delve more deeply into their understandings of their experiences. This committed focus to a single set of questions was an instrumental part of the process as evidenced by the fact that discussions that occurred in one session would often lead to insights and ideas about the following week's photos and reflections.

Second, the use of photography required that participants *physically interact with their community*, promoting reflection as they journeyed through their everyday lives in search of photo subjects that would provide answers to the framing questions. Participants described how the process of "carrying their camera with them everywhere" caused them to continually reflect on their surroundings and reconsider the common and sometimes ignored objects and events that surrounded their daily lives.

Third, during the facilitated dialogue in the group sessions, participants were asked by the Pho-

tovoice facilitators and other group members to explain their meaning and their stories in a more detailed manner. This process of *purposeful sense making* was a powerful way for many participants to gain insight into their lives:

> I didn't realize on some things how I felt until I had to explain the picture.

> You got to sit down and talk and get serious. At times we really broke things down and we just let our hair down, no holds barred, we just talked. We didn't hide anything, we didn't have any reason to. This was really nice. We talked about the way we felt about different things …

A key feature of this facilitated dialogue was the *intentional emphasis on seeking deeper meaning and understanding*. Photovoice facilitators probed with undirected questions, such as "What do you mean by this? Can you explain this some more? What was that like?" to help participants clarify and even expose meaning:

> [The facilitator] would get everybody involved and ask people individually questions. You would not really be forced to answer, but be more compelled to say what you wanted to say. She got everything rolling.

Finally, because people differ in their preferences for different modes of expression, facilitators asked participants to express their ideas and beliefs about their images in written and verbal form. The *use of multiple modes for thinking and communicating* provided participants with ample opportunity for reflection. Given that some participants expressed comfort with some forms of communication used in this project and discomfort with others (e.g., speaking publicly about their photographs, writing reflective notes), it seems that the use of multiple venues for expression helped participants find a comfortable vehicle through which to make their voices heard.

Created a Safe Context for Exploring Diverse Perspectives

Weekly reflection meetings additionally provided participants with an occasion to meet and dialogue with diverse residents from their neighborhood. As described above, the shared process of reflection with individuals representing a range of racial, ethnic, and age groups provided participants with a unique opportunity to positively value diversity and differences within their community.

Although the sharing of distinct and diverse perspectives is a critical component of an empowering participatory process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003), it is often difficult to create an environment that facilitates dialogue and the emergence of diverse perspectives among participants. According to the Photovoice facilitators, they were able to foster meaningful dialogue among participants by encouraging them to view themselves as having something important to share, providing opportunities for participants to explore their own opinions on important matters, and by creating a safe and supportive environment for sharing. In some ways, the process of having individuals each share their own pictures, before the larger group discussion occurred, allowed unique perspectives to emerge that could then be explored by the larger group:

> ... sharing other people's pictures and seeing what they thought ... whether I agreed with the picture or not, or felt what they felt. It was just seeing how other people see things.

The emergence of diverse perspective was also promoted through the *strategic composition of ethnically diverse groups that included both youth and adults.* The configuration of commonality (same neighborhoods) paired with diversity (different ages and ethnicities) seemed to foster an environment where it was safe to explore similarities and differences:

> Having youth involved was really good because our generation is different from theirs. I knew we would try to come together, but having kids here talk about the way they feel, the way they do things, the way they see things, made me feel I still can reach them and make them feel they can sort of trust us more because there's this big gap right now. We realized we have more things in common than not.

> ... and the culture, you know, we had man, woman, Black, White, young, old (in our group)—so it was just a very good cross section which we need to keep up, you know. I think we can get diversity as the name of the game if we can get everybody involved [from] different backgrounds ...

DISCUSSION

Community psychologists have recognized participatory research methods, such as Photovoice, as important, in part, because of the impacts they are believed to foster in participants (Kelly et al., 2001; Rappaport, 1998; Wandersman, 1999). Given the value placed upon participant empowerment within the field of community psychology, the purpose of this study was to empirically validate these presumed impacts by investigating the extent to which and ways in which Photovoice had an impact on participants. Overall, the findings from this study support the assertion that participatory methodologies can and do have impact (Rappaport, 1990). According to the Photovoice participants, this method promoted, to some extent, the participatory competencies that Keiffer (1984) highlighted as critical to the development of individuals as social change agents. Individuals who participated in Photovoice described themselves as having increased skills and efficacy, an expanded critical consciousness about their surroundings, and increased resources for becoming change agents (Keiffer, 1984; Le Compte, 1995). This movement towards the role of change agent is particularly salient among this group of participants given that all were relatively inactive in change efforts prior to participating in this project (according to participants' self report and YWC! staff).

These findings are consistent with the intended impacts of Photovoice as put forth by Wang and colleagues (Wang & Burris, 1997) and as evidenced in other Photovoice projects (i.e., Killon & Wang, 2000; Lykes, 2001; Wang et al., 2000). While these researchers do not describe actually investigating the impact of Photovoice, they do note observing personal growth (Lykes, 2001; Wang et al., 2000), enhanced social connections (Killon & Wang, 2000; Wang et al., 2000), and an emerging critical consciousness (Lykes, 2001) among their Photovoice participants. In other words, it appears that there is converging evidence across several studies that participating in Photovoice can be an empowering experience for individuals. As Keiffer (1984) reminds us, processes or settings are more likely to be empowering when they develop within their participants the capabilities, skills and understandings needed to become engaged in the larger sociopolitical arena.

Given the significant impacts described by the Photovoice participants in this study, it seems important to understand how this method generated such results. Overall, participants described the value of constructing their own narrative about their lives, having opportunities for deep, critical reflection, and being exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences. According to participants, the photographs they took stimulated a *dialogic process* that went beyond the content of the photographs, resulting in

a rich exchange of ideas, concerns, hopes, experiences, and understandings (Berman et al., 2001). As part of this exchange, participants were introduced to the multiple meanings of any one image (Wang & Burris, 1997), requiring them to step outside of themselves (Lykes, 2001), and promoting the development of new insights, understandings, and perceptions (Chambers, 1997).

By capturing the reality of their lives through photographs and discussing their life and experiences with diverse others in their group sessions, Photovoice participants had an opportunity to reflect about community life and community change and gain expanded understandings. It seems as though such reflection, over the course of the Photovoice project, helped individuals gain insight into larger sociopolitical issues (Wallerstein, 1987). Overall, these findings suggest that methods that promote opportunities for individuals to participate in the construction of knowledge and then reflect on that knowledge with others representing the diversity within their communities can be a powerful method for generating critical consciousness and the desire for political action (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001).

What is particularly important to note is that Photovoice as a method does not emphasize the building of consensus across participants, a strategy that is too common in participatory research methods that aim to find the "community's voice" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). When consensus is sought, the community's voice is treated as singular (Cornwall, Guijt, & Welbourn, 1993), ignoring the multiplicity of realities present in community life. In contrast, Photovoice provided opportunity for individual reflection as well as group discourse. As a result, participants developed deeper understandings of their neighborhoods and shared understandings about community life. Importantly, however, the findings indicate that these insights did not replace the participants' own perspectives, but instead broadened them.

Implications for Science and Practice

What do these findings suggest for the science and practice of community psychology? First, these findings suggest that we need to be intentional in the design of our research and evaluation efforts, recognizing that methods can have intervention-like effects on those who participate in them. The empowerment social agenda—a defining feature of the field of community psychology—demands that the means of collecting data "not contradict the aims of empowerment" (Rappaport, 1990). If we accept this position, then it seems essential for us to ensure that our methods support empowering processes. Such assurance can only be guaranteed if we assess the impact of our methods on the individuals and communities that are engaged in them.

This suggests the need for a consciousness within the field concerning the desired outcomes for individuals and communities that participate in our research. In other words, in addition to selecting methods based upon a consideration of the targeted questions that need to be answered and the characteristics of the context, community psychologists should also consider the possible and desired effects of the selected methods on participating individuals and the larger community. The findings from this study suggest that if empowering effects are desired, then methods that provide opportunities for influencing and controlling knowledge construction, promote reflection, and offer opportunities for experiencing diverse perspectives are an appropriate choice. Future researchers should examine whether other methods that are considered to be empowering impact participants in similar ways.

Second, these findings highlight the importance of identifying or developing frameworks for assessing the impact of our methods. The creation of such frameworks helps to make explicit what is valued, expected, and critical to our work; they help to create a disciplined approach to the inquiry of our methods (Cronbach & Suppes, 1969). For example, what criteria should we use to determine if our methods are promoting our social justice or empowerment social agendas? While Keiffer's empowerment framework emerged as a useful framework for this study, it may not be appropriate for other studies, given their specific contexts, methods, or project goals.

Finally, the findings from this study have some potential instrumental use for community psychologists. As a field that employs participatory, empowering methods, and often needs to convince funders of their utility, the collection of data like that found in this study could be helpful in advocating for the use of such methods. In addition, given the increasing press by universities for faculty to document the impact of their work within the community (for promotion and annual review purposes), this study provides one example of how to examine and document such impact.

Limitations and Risks

This Photovoice project was conducted at the same time the seven neighborhoods were experiencing an influx of resources and energy around neighborhood improvement efforts. As a result, individuals were getting excited about the possibility of creating community level change, and a few Photovoice participants even became recipients of mini-grants aimed at creating small, localized change. We believe that for those who described the greatest impact from Photovoice (i.e., became change agents), that impact was due, in part, to the combination of opportunities for both reflection and action. Often, through Photovoice, an issue was identified, possible resolution strategized, and then a participant would seek resources through the local mini-granting process to address the issue. Thus, while it is clear that Photovoice served as a catalyst for action, the coupling of this catalyst with available resources for action suggests that we should consider what role these opportunities play in the impact of Photovoice as an empowering effort. Taken a step further, to what extent could Photovoice be a vehicle for disempowerment if a new awareness of the need for change were not coupled with opportunities for improvement? Future researchers should consider the contextual and resource constraints surrounding the empowering effects of participatory methods.

Further, while the impacts presented in this study are those that participants themselves attributed to their experience with Photovoice, another important limitation is the possibility that participants presented a biased view of these impacts. Participants had invested considerable time in this project and had developed positive relationships with the Photovoice facilitators who came from the same university as the interviewers. This investment may have increased their tendency to overstate the benefits of Photovoice and minimize its negative outcomes. Our confidence in our findings emerges from the fact that several community informants have validated our findings, describing the impacts they have personally witnessed on Photovoice participants. For example, several Photovoice participants have emerged as neighborhood leaders within their community and have attributed their new roles to their participation in this project.

Limits to the generalizability of our findings should also be considered. One specific threat to generalizability is the possible selection bias that occurred in the participant sample. Eleven of the individuals who initially participated in the orientation and training sessions elected not to participate in this Photovoice project. It can certainly be assumed, given the voluntary nature of the project and the time commitment involved, that several factors such as an interest in community, a desire to learn photography, and/or a certain level of time availability may have influenced participants' decision to participate in Photovoice. For example, it is possible that the 29 individuals who selected to participate were more interested in becoming involved in their community and thus more predisposed to develop the participatory competencies we found in our study. The actual impact of Photovoice may be less or different on individuals who are not yet ready to or interested in becoming more involved in their community.

CONCLUSION

As a field, community psychology is committed to promoting social justice and empowerment, although we recognize that we still have much to do to achieve these goals (Prilleltensky, 2001). The findings from this study suggest that one strategy for supporting these goals would be to support and seek participatory research or evaluation methods that engage individuals from distressed or oppressed communities as partners in the research process. Through such partnerships, and the examination and critique of their impact, we are more likely to win the battle against many significant social issues (Minkler, 1997) and become better equipped to address the range of social ills we are so passionately concerned about.

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