

# Photovoice - A Picture is Worth More Than a Thousand Words

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Photovoice was originally developed by public health researchers with three main goals: 1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through discussion of photographs, and 3) to reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 1999).

The method can be applied arguably in any group on any topic, such as women's health promotion (Wang, 1999), children's injury trajectory (Sims-Gould et al., 2014), and physical activity and older women (Sims-Gould et al., 2010). Here, I am sharing some key points and recommendations after having recently completed two Photovoice projects on ethnocultural elderly's experiences in Canada and on older men's relationship with physical activity respectively.

## Technology and seniors

- We used digital cameras and iPhone 4s for the two projects. Participants seemed to have an easier time maneuvering the digital cameras than the iPhones due to the many apps on the phones.
- We found that participants were generally not very familiar with technology. Digital cameras, although bulkier, might be preferable.
- Surprisingly, the group using the iPhones took many more pictures than the group using digital cameras.

## Quality of photos

- The older men sample paid a lot of attention to the lighting, brightness and symmetry of the photos.
- Unexpectedly, they also attributed varied symbolic and philosophical meanings to the photos to explain their life course and experiences in old age. The research team did not foresee this outcome with male participants.

## Interviewing techniques

- We asked the participants to pick their favourite or most meaningful photos related to the research topic in advance of the interviews. In some cases, we also picked a few photos to discuss with them in case they could not decide on which photos were relevant and significant.
- When interviewing them, *try not to take the photos at face value*. Instead, probe for their life circumstances and experiences beyond what you can "see from your eyes" in the photos. *They tell you a lot more than you think.*

- If possible, ask about whether the photos they find most important are related in any way. For example, do they tell a sequence of events? Do they mutually support one another or are polar opposites? Do they tell a more complete picture of the participants' situations when put together?

#### Adding “spice” to the project

- Ask participants to caption the pictures either before the interview happens or during the interview. You'd be surprised at how creative and to the point the captions are that they come up with.
- Organize a photo exhibit and gather the participants. This achieves three things: 1) to share the findings and solicit feedback from the group as an aggregate, not individually (i.e., member checking); 2) to empower the participants through community building and give them a sense of “not being alone”, especially with disenfranchised groups and/or sensitive topics; and 3) to show that you, as the researcher, do care.
- Build in the research proposal the budget and time commitment for the photo exhibit. It reflects the spirit of Photovoice as an empowerment and evaluation strategy and should not be neglected.

Lastly, have fun and some good laughs with the participants when reviewing the photos together. This is one of the most interesting community-based research methodologies out there!

#### References

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