

Utilizing Photovoice as a Participatory Research Tool in Recreation Therapy

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Databases: CINAHL, EBSCO, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO

Number of Articles: 9

Summary of Research Findings

Recreation therapists have the opportunity to work with diverse populations, including people with psychiatric disorders, at-risk youth, and people experiencing homelessness. It is not, however, always easy to connect with these clients or to understand their issues and concerns. Exploring the research related to marginalized populations, information concerning the meaning of recreation and leisure from these perspectives is sometimes limited, which provides justification for researching a better way to reach individuals in society who are marginalized and stigmatized. Photovoice is a growing community-based participatory data collection method utilized in qualitative research by social scientists (Rania, Migliorini, Rebora, & Cardinali, 2015). The process of using photovoice allows researchers to increase trust with disadvantaged populations, where researchers are typically seen as either elitist or unable to understand the issues of that particular population (Wang, 2003). Recreation therapists have the opportunity to work with a variety of clientele, including those that have been stigmatized or marginalized. Using photovoice may allow clients to identify issues they are facing, providing the information that may help recreation therapists better serve these individuals.

The focus of this review is on photovoice as a data collection technique, therefore, the search was not limited studies with a specific research question. This literature review includes six articles that explore how to employ photovoice or photo-elicitation in studying issues related to a marginalized population—individuals who are either homeless or formerly homeless—from the perspective of individuals within that population (i.e., Halifax, Yurichuk, Meeks, & Khandor, 2008; Padgett, Smith, Derejko, Henwood, & Tiderington, 2013; Peterson, Antony, & Thomas, 2012; Smith, Padgett, Choy-Brown, & Henwood, 2015; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2010; Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000). The focus was to enable these individuals to share their stories and various aspects of their life (Halifax et al., 2008; Padgett et al., 2013). However, all of the studies followed the process of photovoice and found that it led to deeper and more meaningful conversations with the participants. The researchers often started the process by training participants on the photovoice project, including basic camera skills and ethical concerns related to taking photos of others. Purposeful directions were given to participants concerning what to photograph in order to allow free expression of their views related to the research themes. Because participants direct themselves in regard to what photographs to take, it also gives them a reason to go out and engage with their community (Padgett et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2015).

A photovoice project's purpose is to facilitate discussion on the issues surrounding participants' self-selected photographs. While some researchers prefer to host group meetings or interviews to help participants process and reflect upon the photographs (Halifax et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2012; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2010; Wang et al., 2000), others utilized individual interviews to understand the meaning of the photographs (Padgett et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2015). Researchers also reported that participating in group discussions not only allowed researchers to promote critical dialogue within the group, but also that these meetings helped participants forge a sense of community (Halifax et al., 2008; Walsh et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2000) and influenced the continuation of pro-social behavior (Peterson et al., 2012).

Some researchers chose to present the photographs to the public as a way to increase awareness of the issues and to promote social change (Halifax et al., 2008; Padgett et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2000). Wang et al. (2000) organized a gallery display of the photographs taken by the participants and invited policymakers to discuss community issues reflected in these photos. Halifax et al. (2008) presented the information at conferences, in publications, and at meetings with policymakers, while Padgett et al. (2013) reported they also planned to organize a gallery to show photos taken by those participants willing to share their views with the public. Sharing the information with policymakers and the broader community not only raised awareness of the social issues, but also allowed participants to feel important and understood after learning how to present the information they found, thereby building self-advocacy skills (Halifax et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2000).

There were some challenges noted after conducting these photovoice projects. Most of the researchers asked their participants to get signed consent forms when taking photos of individuals, and researchers noted that there were fewer photographs of people than expected. The lack of people in photographs may be related to perceived social rejection and isolation among the homeless population. It was also difficult to maintain their attendance at the group meetings, as individuals experiencing homelessness are a difficult population to maintain constant contact with (Halifax et al., 2008).

These studies positively identified the impact of how the use of photovoice can be useful not only in data collection, but also its potential positive effect on the participants (Wang et al., 2000; Halifax et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2015). All of the researchers agreed that utilizing photographs as the catalyst in qualitative interviews allowed for more meaningful conversations than those elicited from structured interviews or regulated surveys, due to the participants being more engaged. It is clear that photovoice allows homeless individuals to share some of the challenges they face and to bring hidden issues to the forefront. It also empowers these individuals to participate in the community independently through photo taking. Recreation therapists may want to consider more creative ways to assess these populations as they can already feel stigmatized and skeptical. Without cultivating meaningful relationships with clients, recreation therapists may not uncover important motivations, goals, or barriers.

Knowledge Translation Plan

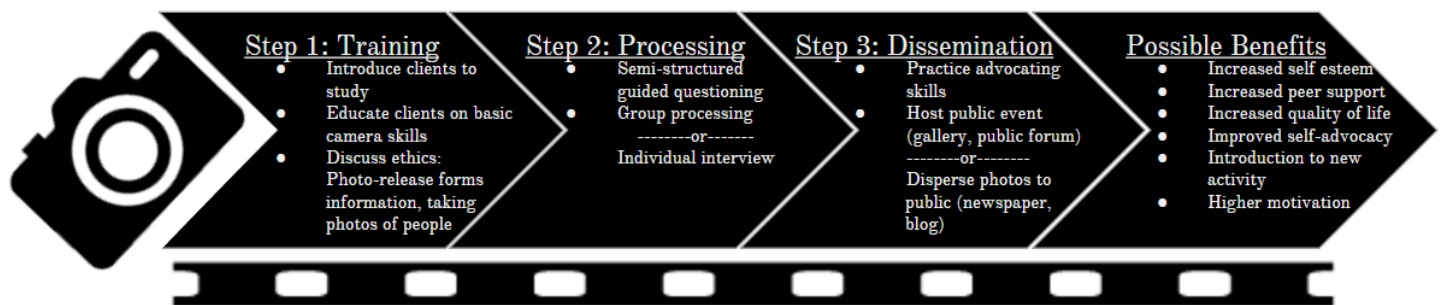
The first step, or training phase, of a photovoice study is extremely important in educating participants about the ethics and basic skills needed to fully participate. All of the studies incorporated an educational session to learn basic camera skills and ethical concerns when taking photographs in the community. Instructing participants about how to ask for a photo release is not only important for ethical reasons, but it is also a much-needed skill for populations that are at risk for social isolation (Wang et al., 2003). Role-playing might be a productive way to ensure participants understand and feel comfortable when asking strangers for their permission to be photographed. Interestingly, there was a lack of photographs of people in the reviewed studies; to combat this, it may be beneficial to have a session dedicated to taking pictures of someone on the street to encourage appropriate socialization.

Second, in four of the reviewed studies (Halifax et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2012; Walsh et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2000), researchers utilized a group processing technique to discuss photographs. For participation in group sessions surrounding sensitive issues, consider utilizing a discussion guideline to prompt conversation and create a sense of social support (Wang et al., 2000, Halifax et al., 2008).

Finally, to enable self-advocacy in participants and induce social change, researchers can choose to disseminate materials by using a gallery to showcase photographs (Wang et al., 2000). Educating participants on appropriate ways to answer questions and engage in conversation with other community members is an invaluable skill that the individuals learn, especially in populations that have a deficit in social skills or are at risk for social isolation. This gallery also allows participants to feel more involved in their community by discussing the issues they feel are important and often overlooked by policymakers.

In addition to researchers, practitioners may also use photovoice in their practice to understand their clients better in various settings. Without understanding the issues and barriers clients face, recreation therapists will not be able to serve them in ways that are the most impactful. Photovoice enables deeper conversations that can be used during the assessment process or group discussions to provide richer information. For instance, in the mental health field, group processing is already utilized by many recreation therapists, however, adding in the photovoice method may enable deeper conversations to take place between clients as photographs can spark discussions. This can be an effective way to create social support and gather more in-depth information from clients on the complex needs a recreation therapist may want to address. Having clients take photographs of barriers they face throughout the week will allow clients to remember specific events and how they addressed it, instead of trying to recall all the barriers faced that week.

Recreation therapists can also utilize the photovoice dissemination method to empower their clients in making changes to their facilities. For instance, residents in nursing homes can take photographs of specific issues that may begin conversation in the administration, as well as their larger communities. Therefore, photovoice can be used as a positive intervention with therapists to not only better serve their clients, but also as a research tool to gather richer data.



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