The first credited use of the photovoice method or process occurred in 1992 with women in the Yunnan Province of China as part of a Ford-Foundation-supported Yunnan Women’s Reproductive Health and Development Program (YWRHDP). This initiative recognized the limited power and voice given to the rural women involved and used photos the women themselves took along with their stories written as photo captions to amplify the needs, issues and concerns as seen by the women themselves.

The development of photovoice by Caroline C. Wang of the University of Michigan, and Mary Ann Burris of the University of London is founded on the power of documentary photography, Paulo Freire’s ‘critical consciousness’ principles that encourages a community to examine the root causes of problems, and feminist theory that espouses the importance of impacted populations to participate in the generation of questions and solutions. Since this initial implementation, the photovoice method has evolved and has been implemented in a wide variety of populations, issues and settings.

What is Photovoice?
Photovoice participants photograph positive and negative aspects of their community with the aim of addressing issues of local concern. The photographs taken are used to critically analyze the issue and later serve as a visual platform at public photo exhibits for participants to inform decision makers about the issues documented. The goal of photovoice is to encourage participation in dialogue and action that will lead to a better community.
Photovoice is founded on some basic foundational beliefs. At its core, is the belief that people of the community itself, not outside experts, are in the best position to understand the strengths and limitations of their community. This internal view, or ‘emic’ view, is given an opportunity to be expressed more readily through the photovoice process than is typically seen with other strategies. With photovoice, participants are the ones generating the photo images of their concerns along with the stories and caption that explain their point of view. Valuing the emic point of view leads to additional core beliefs that people are their own best advocates and that critical decision makers can be partners in positive community change when they are made aware of the issues. Because photovoice encourages a deep analysis of the root causes of the issues identified through the photos and stories captured by participants, the method holds as a foundational belief that addressing the source of a problem is better in the long term than simply telling people how to be healthy. Each of these layered beliefs, or ‘active ingredients, provides the motivation for communities or groups adopting the photovoice process for community change.

Even though photovoice is a social change intervention, social change happens because an individual, or individuals, become aware of an issue and its cause and are willing to take an action to change something for the better. A fundamental tenet, or power, of the photovoice process lies within its potential to move individuals through the steps of rising ‘critical consciousness’. At its core, Photovoice moves individuals from a state of passive adaptation (to current community circumstances) through an emotional engagement with issues (such as concern, anger, or hope), resulting in a cognitive awakening (or new understanding) to root causes or reasons for an identified problem. Each of these phases of increased awareness, or critical consciousness, leads to the final stage of an intention to act where people involved in the process shift their roles from learners to emerging leaders and social actors in their communities.

Goals

The principle goal of photovoice is to improve communities by addressing problems at their root.

The Photovoice method;

• Empowers participants to record community needs and strengths

• Promotes critical discussion among participants about the root causes of the issues
Typical Photovoice Steps

While the implementation of photovoice varies, the process follows a typical set of steps that begins with a group of engaged participants that ultimately endeavor to promote positive changes for their community.

- Creates a platform for participants to engage with policymakers, local leaders, the media, and the general community population
- Advocates for policy, systems and environmental changes that address the root causes of a problem and are more likely to provide for a sustained positive impact on a community

Group Formation

Most photovoice efforts begin with the identification of a group of individuals that will be involved in the execution of the effort. Research has identified participation is a primary driver of the degree to which photovoice is able to achieve its aim of addressing root causes and community improvements. Photovoice efforts that begin with a coherent and motivated group are more likely to be successful in their efforts, however, evidence also suggest that the photovoice process itself is an excellent facilitator of coherent group formation and motivation for change.

Grounding Participants in the Photovoice Process

Prior to taking cameras into the community, participants are grounded in the principles of the photovoice process. This initial grounding is critical for group formation, developing a sense of mutual purpose, and ensuring respectful and ethical principles are followed throughout the process. It is important during this early stage of the process to sensitize participants to ethical considerations and to provide strategies to protect the privacy of others as well as protect their personal safety along with that of their organization and community.

Documenting Issues of Concern

The group begins taking and sharing photos that represent issues of local concern. A common strategy to get individuals and groups into the community taking photos is through the use of Photo Missions that assigned as a prompt or theme in order to get the group going. It is also used to encourage groups to take photos about a particular issue, or just about general things that they like or don’t like in their community.

Dialogue of Root Causes

Participants talk with each other about why they took each photo, the meaning behind each photo, and what the group could do to see things change. The photovoice SHOWED mnemonic provides a guide for the common set of questions used to facilitate group discussions.

S... What do you SEE here?
H... What’s really HAPPENING here?
O... How does this relate to OUR lives?
W... WHY does this problem or situation exist?
E... How could this image EDUCATE others (the community, policy makers, etc.)?
D... What can we DO about the problem or situation?
Writing
Using group discussions of the SHOWED method, the group members are ready to begin telling their stories through captions. Well-written captions provide the context for the photos taken and have the added impact of evoking emotion, insight into root causes, and appeals to actions for addressing the identified concern. This is a critical phase of the photovoice process as photos with captions have been shown to be much more powerful than photos alone. Because the process encourages critical thinking and communication skills it is likely that participants will strengthen their writing and communication skills.

Sorting Issues into Themes
Groups examine the collection of photos and captions that express the idea or stories they want to tell. Because the goal of photovoice is to educate and influence those who can facilitate local change, consideration is given to the identification of identify themes within the group of photos, and then select the most compelling photos to focus on.

Planning Public Dissemination
In order to have a successful photovoice effort, attention needs to be given to the messages, venue and attendee list for the public photo exhibit. The group must think through the nuts and bolts of what it takes to host a photovoice exhibit in their community, and plan an event that captures the interest of community members and decision makers.

Hosting a Public Photovoice Exhibit
A culminating, but not final, step of the photovoice process is the public photo exhibit. While the photos and captions provide a rich message, having the opportunity for participants and local decision makers to interact and discuss the photos has the greatest potential for achieving the desired impact of leading a decision maker to an ‘intention to act’ on the issue or concern raised.

Advocacy for Local Change
While public photo exhibits are a powerful means for educating and raising awareness to local issues of concern, continued advocacy efforts are typically needed to reinforce messages and to follow-up with local decision makers responsible for change. Strategies of this phase can include: additional photo exhibits, use of social media, presentations to local boards, letters to the editor and other media coverage. It is common for the powerful visual elements of photovoice to attract those interested in sponsorship and enhancing the appeal of fundraising efforts to address local concerns. A trait of successful photovoice efforts is the degree to which the process is able to harness the energy and passions of participants and those touched by the photovoice process, which is needed for sustaining efforts to address issues of local concern.

Considerations
Carrying out a photovoice effort has some common challenges that should be considered when planning to use the method. The process does require some resources to carry out and typically include considerations for cameras, printing photos and captions, meeting facilitation and hosting a public photovoice exhibit.

With any community change effort, awareness of the political and local decision-making process is warranted. Some common challenges include getting key decision makers to attend a local photovoice exhibit, decision makers that may lack resources or power to address underlying issues, and encountering those with viewpoints that differ from those expressed by the photovoice group. Additionally, many groups fail to plan and execute adequate follow-up activities after the photovoice event. Such follow-up can be critical to leverage the momentum created at the photovoice event into desired actions for change.

Because community changes can be both challenging as well as slow, those leading a photovoice project should always be attentive to managing the expectations and commitment of the participants. Application of the photovoice effort will always be as unique as the participants, communities, and issues it attempts to address.
Josh’s Photovoice Story

Josh did not want to include his photo in the exhibit and it took some convincing. You see, Josh just expects his school to be run down. In fact, when asked why he didn’t want the photo included in the public photovoice exhibit he simply said, “I don’t want people to know I go to a crappy school”. It was then that we explained to Josh that his photo and caption could make a difference. Little did we know that only three weeks later an assistant to the State Governor would see his photo at their public photovoice exhibit.

As a result of Josh’s taking the photo of his school and displaying it in a public Photovoice exhibit, a crew was sent over to fix the ceiling of Josh’s school. Two other amazing things came out of this experience 1) an issue of this child’s life was addressed, and 2) Josh learned the amazing power of his voice.

In fact, when he found out the impact of his photo and his caption you could see his chest swell with pride. It was then that he learned that communication, conviction to a purpose, and belief in making a difference was something that he was going to embrace the rest of his life.

Photovoice has this power. It has the power to put people’s concerns on public display so that a community’s voice can be heard. It has the power to build civic pride, purpose, and local change agents.
About the Author

Dr. Robert Strack is an Associate Professor of Public Health Education at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. Dr. Strack’s research has primarily focused on the health and social issues of youth and adolescents.