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Undergraduate Student Process Reflections on Utilizing Photovoice to Learn Principles of Feminist Research

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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements: A special thanks to our professor and supporter, Dr. Genevieve Cox, for her guidance, encouragement, and expertise. We would also like to thank those who participated—your input was invaluable, and we hope the increased use of feminist research practices helps inspire others to shed light on the lived experiences of our communities.

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Introduction and rationale

Photovoice is a participant-oriented research methodology applied in community-based participatory action research (PAR) (Schell et al., 2009). Wang and Burris (1997) developed Photovoice, grounded in “critical consciousness, feminist theory, and documentary photography,” to assist in recording and reflecting on community strengths and concerns (p. 370). This lays the groundwork for critical communication with policymakers. Among feminist research methodologies, Photovoice stands out for its allegiance to feminist research principles and capacity to invoke community-driven change (Budig et al., 2018). Because of its ability to challenge traditional power imbalances between researchers and participants, it is well-suited to employ in teaching feminist research principles (Wang et al., 2000).

In the university setting, Photovoice can promote critical thinking, engaged social learning, and the expansion of personal ideas on knowledge production (Schell et al., 2009). Pain et al.'s (2012) undergraduate PAR study found relationship building was integral to student experiences and included “whole-person engagement that is simultaneously intellectual, professional, social and emotional” (p. 39). Students identified real-world connections, put theory into practice, formed relationships outside of an academic context, and faced contradictions directly (Pain et al., 2012). Photovoice has vocally empowered and engaged local communities of underserved adolescent students (Shah, 2015; Wilson et al., 2007). However, this approach can unintentionally reinforce separation between students, rather than bridging understandings. (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016). Although popular, Photovoice as a platform for learning participant-oriented research methodologies for undergraduate students remains largely unexplored. Undergraduate students-as-investigators, not participants, is a less common configuration of Photovoice in the classroom and one we move to explore in this article.

Redefining power between instructor and student stands as a core element of feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1987). Shrewsbury (1987) defined power as a power *to* rather than a power *over*, asserting a significant shift from a traditional power orientation within classrooms. Likewise, a fundamental dimension of PAR includes a power shift so that participants direct research trajectories and outcomes (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014). In this article, we examine Photovoice, applied as an original teaching activity, as a way to meld power assertions within a semester-long course.

As a class of 16 undergraduate students (the authors of this paper), under the support of our professor and last author, we undertook five Photovoice projects in our local community as an engaged method of learning and practicing feminist research principles. We expanded our perspectives and knowledge about qualitative research processes through these projects, as well as navigating Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Ritchie (2021) found that within community-based undergraduate research experiences, students undergoing mock IRB processes showed increased knowledge and application of the research ethic principles of beneficence, respect, and justice. A foundation of ethics connects the IRB with feminist PAR—the latter of which has an ethical orientation promoting the collaborative inclusion of, respect for, and benefit to participants within the research process (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014). However, review boards might conflict with the ethical obligations of feminist PAR, such as through paternalism (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014). Important discussions surrounding ethics and our roles as researchers permeated our Photovoice projects, including in relation to the IRB.

Guided by foundations of feminist theory and ethical research principles, we created research questions from our personal interests. With our professor's guidance, we collaboratively wrote this challenging but equally as rewarding article in a classroom workshop format.

Learning objectives: Professor lens

Core objectives:

- Utilize critical thinking and self-reflexivity to evaluate existing feminist PAR
- Apply the social, engaged, collaborative, and methodological skills of feminist PAR to writing, designing, and conducting research

In designing a Women's Studies capstone course entitled "Feminist Contributions to Community Research," I aimed to develop a course where students utilized the tools of feminist emancipatory research. I reasoned that teaching students to "do" feminist research necessitated a flexible epistemological and pedagogical teaching stance, which included collaboration and modeling the principles of feminist PAR myself. Given feminist PAR often engages collaborative approaches between university partners and communities (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014), I asked students to focus on a semester-long group project in the local community grounded in Photovoice methodology. Through conversations as the first month commenced, it became clear to me that the students would benefit more from developing a collaborative manuscript than a final paper. To model "engaged

pedagogy”, agency (hooks, 1994; Strand, 2021), flexibility, collaboration, and the social skills involved in feminist PAR, I shifted trajectories mid-semester, following student feedback, and rewrote the syllabus calendar to focus on article writing and critiquing workshops, and on Photovoice meetings, research, and presentations.

Explanation

Existing PAR evaluation

Evaluating feminist PAR was paramount to our success in conducting a modified version of Photovoice to fit the constraints of a semester-long course. We established a background in feminist research and ethics through reading, reflection, lectures, and critical group discussions. This served as a baseline from which we engaged our Photovoice projects. As our course progressed, so did our exploration of feminist PAR, promoting continual reflection on core feminist principles and supporting the application thereof.

Topic selection and research proposal

Each group discussed their research topics, informed by critical discussion of existing feminist research articles. Proactive incorporation of feminist PAR enhanced our understanding of feminist approaches to research, including emphasis on intersectional understandings, and focusing on marginalized voices. Groups selected topics as follows: undergraduate students’ experience of the menstrual cycle, local unhoused youth, sexual assault resources on campus, financial strain and well-being of undergraduate students, and burnout among professionals aiding domestic violence survivors.

IRB: Exemption and limitations

Groups were individually granted exemption status from our university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), contingent on appropriate confidentiality measures for all participants. We were aware of this step’s time consumption, which was deemed limiting while lacking reflection on how this process could have benefitted us. Future projects might instead frame this process as an exercise in ethics application, promoting reflection on skills and safeguarding practices throughout this process.

Conducting research

While research methods varied between groups, many connected with local organizations and preexisting social networks to reach out to potential participants. Student investigators gathered informed consent and shared Photovoice instructions with participants. Over the course of two to four weeks, participants took photographs, made selections, and wrote short narratives providing insight into

their images and lived experiences. As a class, we did not partake in subsequent participatory processes. For example, Wilson and colleagues' (2007) curriculum included collaborative participant discussions in both small and large groups, participatory analysis, and group-level and community-level social action.

Research synthesis and presentation

We concluded by presenting, to the wider group, pairs of photos and narratives produced by our research participants that we thought best represented the experiences of our communities. To build cognizant understandings within our audience—each other and our professor—we included background information to contextualize participant productions.

Debriefing

While still a part of our modified Photovoice implementation, our debriefing process happened in part during group presentations, in addition to reflective surveys and collaborative writing. After research participants had captured photographs, developed written narratives analyzing meaning, and shared those with their student investigators, we compared photos and narratives and sought thematic patterns as groups. Each group assembled a presentation with background research, participant photographs and narratives, identified themes, and a set of discussion questions. Presentations featured individual experiences of the participants, including what had been expected and what surprised us. In the following discussions, we engaged with one another, “[expanding] the initial analysis presented by the groups,” one student reflected.

As the following examples will show, our research captured a range of directions and communities of interest. We gravitated towards communities with which we already had ties. This potentially led to a deeper connection to the participants and the outcomes.

Student-selected communities of interest had varying degrees of vulnerability — perhaps the most of which centered on local youth houselessness. Many participants had firsthand experience with youth houselessness or housing instability. **Figure 1**, an impactful image and narrative during our presentations, demonstrates just a portion of what participants developed and shared with us as researchers. Practicing self-reflexivity, empowerment, and care, person(s) in this group drew from their close, personal backgrounds when working with those who had or still faced houselessness. This group exemplified the extra consideration and attention required to work with a community and participants with higher levels of vulnerability.

Figure 1

1994 Toyota Tercel used for emergency shelter



Note. Excerpt from the paired narrative: “The only shelter I had during this time was a red 1994 Toyota Tercel that I managed to pick up only days before being expelled from the trailer. I spent the next month stuffed into the back seat during one of the hottest summers in recent memory.”

In contrast, another group oriented their Photovoice project around the menstrual cycle. Still working with a historically disenfranchised population, female-bodied individuals, these participants were not as acutely vulnerable as the prior community. **Figure 2** displays one photo and humorous description developed by a participant. Finally, to address a sensitive issue, but maintain distance from a vulnerable and potentially traumatized population, another group contacted campus sexual assault resources, rather than working with sexual assault survivors directly. **Figure 3** captures a painting displayed in their building and describes a mindset one individual working with survivors tries to adopt. These three photos and description segments highlight the broad range of topics and levels of vulnerability of participants, in addition to exemplifying some of the ways we reflexively collaborated with participants.

Additional process debriefing occurred through the completion of two student-created open-ended question surveys, one given mid-project and the other after presentations, designed to understand student experiences and perspectives. The breadth of individual student experiences may have been captured best during this process. One student wrote, “I found that even as a person who experienced a similar background as our [research] participants, I still gained so much knowledge of the current issue and they inspired us to be active participants in helping [the community] in our area.”

Figure 2

Lemon being stabbed as a visual representation of menstruation



Note. Excerpt from the paired narrative: “Having a period feels like your uterus is being stabbed and squished.”

Figure 3

“Flowers of Hope” – words of encouragement for sexual assault survivors



Note. Excerpt from the paired narrative: “Just as flowers grow with the right nutrients, we can all grow and overcome adversity with people by our sides.”

Finally, we co-created the earliest draft of this manuscript utilizing each core element of the course. Article development necessitated continual application of critical feminist lenses, weighing ethical demands of emancipatory research, and self-reflexivity.

In a different classroom application of Photovoice, Call-Cummings and Martinez (2016) found a lack of “critical reflection” by exhibition audience members “[allowed] criticism of the Other but not reflection on oneself,” unintentionally entrenching difference (pp. 807-808). As both student-researchers and audience members, our primary mechanism in avoiding this issue was central integration of self-reflexive processes, such as critical discussions and debriefing. Built into the course in numerous ways was emphasis on the collective, while valuing the individual. In future implementations, we recommend a multifaceted debriefing approach, layering together individual, group, and class critical reflection, discussion, and writing.

Assessment

Due to the self-reflexive nature of feminist PAR, assessment outcomes for this original teaching activity were largely directed, collected, and analyzed by us, the students. We both learned and applied principles of feminist PAR, meeting learning objectives, as evidenced through both our regard for, and critique of, our research methods. We found this course and Photovoice provided us value, pushing many of us outside of our comfort zones, and producing impactful photographs and narratives—insight into the experiences of communities around us.

Presentations proved vital in solidifying our impressions—this is when we saw the scope of our class’s investigations; engaged in perspective-taking; and immersed ourselves in the moving, non-traditional learning experiences of our classmates. For example, we learned more about youth houselessness in day-to-day life, reading heart-wrenching experiences of a mother forced to live with her children tucked away in the woods. We saw glimpses into the life of someone starting their day at 3:00 a.m., working to survive while attempting to attend school, their heart breaking when they felt barred from success. We grasped the emotional toll caring for others can take, but also the comradery and resiliency folks cultivate collectively in supporting students. Our research showed us more than facts, expanding our capacity for understanding others. Presentations fostered a sense of community with one another and empathy with those who shared pieces of their world with us. We assume, therefore, an exhibit including both participants and the larger community would prove beneficial. Likewise, survey responses supported class discussions as being crucial to our learning, and we expect critical, self-reflexive group discussions would also provide value to participants.

Rooted in feminist PAR principles, many of us further demonstrated our learning by critically engaging with our Photovoice projects. One student wrote:

... one thing I grappled with was the concept of “helicopter studies.” I felt that due to our condensed time to conduct research in our community and curate our Photovoice presentations, our research didn’t really serve any concrete purpose, other than to just inform our fellow classmates about issues surrounding our specific topics. That being said, it was a really cool experience to work even in just a minimal capacity with the community.

In all feminist participatory action research, researchers should consider the ramifications of their work upon their communities of focus; wherein participants drive outcomes rather than researchers pushing an activism agenda on issues not at the forefront of the communities’ concerns (Bell, 2015). In applying this standard to our own projects, we did not meet all obligations of feminist PAR. Contributing factors include researcher-developed focus areas and research questions, which may have overridden research participants’ ability to dictate outcomes. Additionally, feminist PAR calls for greater direct benefit to participants and their communities.

We were, however, able to develop and adopt self-reflexivity over time—a necessary skill in conducting feminist PAR. The most common critiques were limited time availability for participant interaction and project development, in addition to desiring greater social action. Those who reported dissatisfaction with the time allocation were those working with more vulnerable communities and felt their role as researchers was left unfulfilled within PAR. Consequently, we caution research with particularly underprivileged communities for time-restrained, single-semester undergraduate pedagogy—not for the difficulty students may face, but to better meet overall goals of feminist participatory action research (Cook & Fonow, 1986). Despite ardent recommendations, the vast majority held a positive view of Photovoice and high regard for its capacity as a teaching tool. Photovoice methodologies with student researchers and community participation, when embedded in feminist PAR, created opportunity to find solidarity among ourselves, practice self-reflexivity, and engage in processes of co-creating with both professor and participants, rescripting traditional power dynamics.

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