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## Youth Participation in Photovoice as a Strategy for Community Change

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# Youth Participation in Photovoice as a Strategy for Community Change

Caroline C. Wang, DrPH, MPH

**SUMMARY.** Photovoice is a participatory action research strategy which can contribute to youth mobilization for community change. The strategy can enable youth to (1) record and vivify their community's strengths and concerns; (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through group discussion of photographs; and (3) reach policy makers. Following a description of the photovoice methodology, this article briefly highlights ten projects in which youth used photovoice to represent, advocate, and enhance community health and well-being. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Photovoice, youth participation, advocacy, photography, policy, community action

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In Baltimore, Maryland, a 12-year-old photographs a six-year-old boy in a bar with a 17-year-old sister who was drinking, and writes that any young person in the neighborhood has access to a cigarette vending machine and perhaps alcohol (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2003). In Flint, Michigan, a high school sophomore photographs a young, educated Black man holding a camera to illustrate how racial profiling might lead to false accusations of stealing (Tom-Quinn, 2002). And in a town in Western Australia, a 14-year-old aborigine photographs a hotel on the main street with a sign that says, "Restaurant Open. Skimpy today and tonight" and notes, "Skimpies are women walking around naked, half naked" (Larson, Mitchell, & Gilles, 2001). Living in places far afield from one another, these young persons used a methodology called "photovoice" to contribute to their community's health and well-being. Drawing from ten examples of photovoice projects in places ranging from the San Francisco Bay area to South Africa, this article discusses the contributions of the methodology as a strategy for engaging youth in policy advocacy and community change.

### ***PHOTOVOICE-OVERVIEW***

Photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR) method based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and a community-based approach to documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996). Rooted in democratic ideals, the methodology entails providing people with cameras so that they can photograph their everyday realities. Photovoice is based on the concepts that images teach, pictures can influence policy, and community people ought to participate in creating and defining the images that shape healthful public policy (Wang, 1999).

The photovoice concept, method, and use for participatory action research were created by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, and applied first in the Ford Foundation-supported Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program in Yunnan, China (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Wang, Wu, Zhan, & Carovano, 1998). Photovoice has three main goals: to enable people to (1) record and represent their everyday realities; (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community strengths and concerns; and (3) reach policymakers. The application of photovoice towards conducting participatory needs assessment, asset-mapping, and evaluation,

as well as reaching policy makers, has been discussed elsewhere (Killion & Wang, 2000; Wang, 1999, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000; Wang & Pies, 2004; Wang, Wu, Zhan, & Carovano, 1998; Wang, Yuan, & Feng, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to take a modest step toward examining youth participation in photovoice. The article is divided into three sections. The Methods section below describes the steps developed for photovoice. Second, ten photovoice projects defined by youth participation and public advocacy are briefly highlighted. Finally, in the Discussion section, contributions and limitations for youth participation in community change are discussed.

### **PHOTOVOICE METHODS**

A nine-step strategy to mobilize community action through the use of photovoice is presented below.

1. *Select and recruit a target audience of policy makers or community leaders.* Who has the power to make decisions that can improve the situation? The target audience may include city council members and other politicians, journalists, physicians, administrators, researchers, business people, and community leaders with the power to make and implement participants' recommendations. As an ad hoc advisory board to the project, their primary role is to serve as a group with the political will to put participants' ideas into practice. The inter-generational Flint Photovoice and other projects have created "guidance groups" of policy makers and sympathetic community leaders who serve as the influential audience for participants' images, stories, and recommendations.
2. *Recruit a group of photovoice participants.* To allow for practical ease and in-depth discussion, seven to ten people is an ideal group size. Youth photovoice participants have been recruited and mobilized through elementary, middle, and high schools, church groups, vocational programs, clinics, and teen centers. In addition, projects in which both youth and adults take photographs, such as Flint Photovoice, provide an opportunity to gain comparative generational perspectives on community issues. It should be noted that step 1 and step 2 are interchangeable in sequence; youth

participants could come together first and then decide upon their primary intended audience/s.

3. *Introduce the photovoice methodology to participants, and facilitate a group discussion about cameras, power, and ethics.* The first workshop begins with an introduction to the photovoice concept and method. It emphasizes the aim to influence policy makers and community leaders; the responsibility and authority conferred upon the photographer wielding the camera; an ethic of giving photographs back to community people to express thanks; and how to minimize potential risks to youth participants' well-being. To support this last point, facilitators and youth photographers discuss questions that include:
  - What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take their picture?
  - Whether you ought to take pictures of other people without their knowledge?
  - When would you *not* want to have your picture taken?
  - To whom might you wish to give photographs, and what might be the implications?
4. *Obtain informed consent.* One hallmark of photovoice training is that the first session emphasizes safety and the authority and responsibility that come with using a camera. Facilitators must consider how participants' vulnerability may be further modified by their young age, as well as their social class, access to power (or lack thereof), health concerns, and other factors. Facilitators should explain the written informed consent form, which ought to include a statement of project activities and significance, specific potential risks and benefits, the voluntary nature of participation and freedom to withdraw at any time for any reason, and the understanding that no photographs identifying specific individuals will be released without separate written consent of not only the photographer but also the identified individuals (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). The informed consent of parents or guardians for all minors, as well as youth participants' consent, must be obtained.
5. *Pose initial theme/s for taking pictures.* Participants may wish to brainstorm together about what themes they can focus upon to enhance community health, and then determine individually what

they wish to photograph. Or, given a specific project theme such as violence prevention, participants may discuss ways in which they might portray conditions and factors that contribute to or prevent violence. For subsequent rounds of picture-taking, participants can generate specific, related ways of thinking about what to photograph in terms of open-ended questions.

6. *Distribute cameras to participants and review how to use the camera.* What kind of camera should be used? At least four different kinds of cameras have been used for photovoice projects: autofocus, autorewind cameras; disposable cameras; medium format Holga cameras; and digital cameras. The choice of camera can be guided by facilitators' and participants' preferences and practical considerations. For example, if participants will take more than two or three rolls of film, then disposable cameras may be least cost-effective. If participants have a strong interest in using a camera that allows for maximum creative expression, and facilitators are experienced with the medium format Holga, then they may prefer this inexpensive camera that permits multiple exposures so that people can literally layer the meaning of their images.
7. *Provide time for participants to take pictures.* Participants agree to turn in their images to a facilitator for developing and/or enlarging at a specified time, such as one week after the initial workshop, and then to gather again to discuss their photographs.
8. *Meet to discuss photographs and identify themes.* The next three stages—selecting photographs, contextualizing or storytelling, and codifying issues, themes, or theories—occur during group discussion. First, each participant may be asked to select and talk about one or two photographs that s/he feels is most significant, or simply likes best. Second, participants may frame stories about—and take a critical stance toward—their photographs in terms of questions spelling the mnemonic SHOWeD:
  - What do you *See* here?
  - What's really *Happening* here?
  - How does this relate to *Our* lives?
  - Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
  - What can we *Do* about it?

Third, participants codify the issues, themes, or theories that arise from their photographs. Given that photovoice is well-suited to

action-oriented analysis that creates practical guidelines, participants may particularly focus on issues. These stages are carried out for each round of photographs taken by participants. The number of photovoice rounds will depend on factors that include facilitators' and participants' preferences, overall project scope and budget, and other practical considerations. One to six rounds were carried out for most of the photovoice projects discussed in this paper.

9. *Plan with participants a format to share photographs and stories with policy makers or community leaders.* Facilitators and participants typically plan a format such as a Powerpoint slide show or an exhibition to amplify participants' photographs, stories, and recommendations to policy makers and community leaders. For example, in Flint Photovoice, facilitators and participants organized a slide show and exhibition held at the city's main library where youth and adult participants shared their photographs and stories with an audience that included the mayor, journalists, community leaders, and researchers.

The above outline provides a brief methodological overview. A detailed discussion of photovoice methodology can be found in Wang and Burris (1997) and Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001).

### **PHOTOVOICE PROJECTS WITH YOUTH PARTICIPATION FOR COMMUNITY ACTION**

As the Editors of this volume note, youth participation "expresses the view of youth as competent citizens and active participants in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives." Photovoice offers an ideal way for young people to harness the power of these roles to enhance their community's well-being. Innovative photovoice projects grounded in youth participation and youth culture have been initiated around the US and the world; it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive review of all such projects. Ten projects known to the author, summarized in Table 1 and described briefly below, provide examples of intergenerational photovoice initiatives that promote youth participation and community change.

*Youth Against Violence Photovoice.* This project brought together young people from around Flint to generate photographs and dialogue

TABLE 1. Intergenerational Photovoice to Promote Youth Participation and Community Change

Project Title Location	Funding Source	Theme of Project	Participants Who Took Photographs	Primary Intended Audience
Youth Against Violence Photovoice Flint, Michigan	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	Conditions that contribute to or prevent violence	Elementary through high school youth	Community Steering Committee and community members
Photovoice Youth Empowerment Program  Clarkston, Georgia	DeKalb County Board of Health; Kenneth Cole Foundation	Community health issues and concerns	African American and refugee high school students	Clarkston Boards of Health and Education, Clarkston officials, law enforcement officers and the business community
Town Criers Photovoice  Oakland, California	California Wellness Foundation	AIDS epidemic among African Americans	Black and Latino youth who knew someone infected with HIV or AIDS	Mainstream and ethnic media
Flint Photovoice    Flint, Michigan	Charles Stewart Mott Foundation	Assets and issues exerting the greatest impact on individual and community health and well-being	Youth participants in the National Institute for Drug Abuse-supported Flint Adolescent Study; youth active in community leadership roles; adult neighborhood activists; and local policy makers and community leaders	Policy makers and community leaders
Youth Empowerment Strategies!  Oakland, California	Centers for Disease Control & Prevention	Concerns and issues that can be targeted for social action	Fifth graders attending public elementary Title I schools serving low income communities	School principals, after-school coordinators, and teachers
Picture Me Tobacco Free: A Youth Photovoice Action Project North Carolina	State's tobacco settlement funds	Influence of tobacco within young people's lives and communities	Youth from African American Baptist churches	Local church leaders, churchgoers, and community members
Youth Photovoice  Baltimore, Maryland	Johns Hopkins University Center for Adolescent Health/ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention	Community assets and deficits	Adolescents involved in an afterschool teen center	Policy makers, researchers, and community leaders
Teen Photovoice: An Educational Empowerment Program  Los Angeles, California	Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program	Influences upon their health behaviors	Minority high school students serving on a Youth Advisory Council for the UCLA/RAND Center for Adolescent Health Promotion	Mainstream media and researchers at the UCLA/RAND Center for Adolescent Health Promotion
Photovoice for Tobacco, Drug, and Alcohol Prevention Among Adolescents Western Cape, South Africa	National Cancer Institute/Fogarty International Center	What is important in their lives, and who is important in their lives	Young people in three racially diverse high schools	Health researchers and policy makers
Young Aboriginal People's View of Sexual Health  Carnarvon, Western Australia	Health Department of Western Australia	What young local people think about HIV, in what ways local Aboriginal youth are protected from HIV, and what are the reasons young people may be at risk	Aboriginal youth	Health Department staff



about their experiences and perceptions of the root causes and solutions to violence in their communities. Teen participants brought in photographs of people and discussed negative attitudes, such as how hard it is deal with anger or resist the fun of a play fight. Older teen participants took more metaphorical pictures to illustrate important positive attitudes that work against violence such as freedom from stereotypes and peer pressure. Several took images to represent prejudice as a cause of violence. Through a civic participation component called KidSpeak, students presented testimony directly to a panel of city council members, county commissioners, state legislators and other policy makers. The project signified a critical coalescence of youth activism, creativity, and leadership to give youth a voice in developing violence prevention policies and programs (Morrel-Samuels, Wang, Bell, & Monk, 2005).

*Photovoice Youth Empowerment Program.* The DeKalb County Board of Health recruited and hired 50 high school students to participate in this program for three of four recent summers. One-third of the students were African American and the others were from refugee families. The students sought to reach leaders in the Clarkston policy, education, law enforcement, and business community. Participants reported acquiring computer and presentation skills, developing self-confidence, and learning to work with those different from themselves. The city's mayor has started a recycling program catalyzed by student presentations and recommendations (Cottrell, 2005).

*Town Criers Photovoice.* Alameda County, California, was the first U.S. county to declare a state of emergency over the disproportionate number of AIDS cases in the African American community. African Americans make up 15% of Alameda County, yet account for 57% of the people diagnosed with AIDS since 1980. Although HIV infections are spreading at alarming rates, silence and taboo surround HIV and AIDS within communities of color. Black and Latino youth were recruited as "town criers" on the AIDS epidemic in Alameda County, and employed the photovoice methodology to raise the prominence of this issue with the media (May, 2001).

*Flint Photovoice.* Forty-one youth and adults were recruited to document community assets and concerns, critically discuss their images, and reach policy makers. At the suggestion of grassroots community leaders, policy makers were included among those participants asked to take photographs. In accordance with established photovoice methodology, another group of policy makers and community leaders was additionally recruited to provide political will and support for implementing photovoice participants' policy and program recommendations. Flint Photovoice enabled

youth to express their concerns about neighborhood violence to local policy makers, and was instrumental in acquiring funding for area violence prevention (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004).

*Youth Empowerment Strategies!* This project in Oakland, California provided 90 fifth graders with an opportunity to practice approaches in which they became actively and socially engaged in their communities. In one of the approaches, students used photovoice to document key issues in their school, their neighborhood, and their larger community. Discussions, co-facilitated by University of California at Berkeley graduate students and local high school students, enabled groups of children to focus upon issues to be promoted or remedied in their communities, leading to each group's design and implementation of a social action project. YES! Group social action projects have included several petition drives, a playground clean-up, and the formation of a first aid "Kidpatrol" at recess (Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Carrillo, Wallerstein, & Garcia, 2006).

*Picture Me Tobacco Free©: A Youth Photovoice Action Project.* In North Carolina, this component of the Tobacco.Reality.Unfiltered campaign, supported through state tobacco settlement funds, enabled cadres of youth from participating African American Baptist churches to document the influence of tobacco within their lives and communities. Each trained Picture Me Tobacco Free© youth team sought to sponsor a photovoice exhibit at their local church and to hold an additional exhibit in a public space (Strack, Davis, Lovelace, & Holmes, 2004).

*Baltimore Youth Photovoice.* Fourteen youth involved in an after-school teen center located in the heart of a multi-ethnic community in Baltimore, Maryland participated in this photovoice project. Four exhibits showcased the work of participants, ages 11 to 17. They attended elementary, middle, and high schools, and sought to inform policy makers about issues that matter to youth living in inner cities. Strack, Magill, and McDonagh (2003) reported that parent participation in this project appeared to strengthen parent-child relationships.

*Teen Photovoice: An Educational Empowerment Program for Los Angeles Area Adolescent High School Students.* Fourteen adolescents serving on a Youth Council for the UCLA/RAND Center for Adolescent Health Promotion used digital cameras to document community influences on adolescent health behaviors. Four core themes emerged from the images taken by youth participants: food and the environment, stress and school, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and garbage in their community. Participants are now developing media products, such as posters, a video documentary, and public service announcements, in

partnership with a local television station (Necheles, Wells, Hawes-Dawson, Chung, Travis, & Schuster, 2004).

*Photovoice for Tobacco, Drug and Alcohol Prevention Among Adolescents in South Africa.* Twenty-four young people in three racially diverse high schools photographed two themes: what is important in their lives, and who is important in their lives. Their work has helped to form the basis for creating youth-produced curricula on tobacco, drug, and alcohol prevention in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (Strecher, Strecher, Swart, Resnicow, & Reddy, 2004).

*Young Aboriginal People's View of Sexual Health in Western Australia.* Aboriginal youth took photographs to "show what young people (in the community) think about HIV," created narratives, and selected images for an exhibition. They identified risk behaviors, including fighting, illicit drug use, alcohol, and aspects of sexual behavior as primary HIV/AIDS risk factors. Project organizers have noted that within local public health governmental institutions, this project increased adult collaborators' respect for young people and a greater appreciation of how youth can contribute effectively to the design of health promotion strategies (Larson, Mitchell, & Gilles, 2001).

## DISCUSSION

Photovoice incorporates the community change principles identified by Checkoway (1990) of citizen participation, social action, and public advocacy, and is well-suited to youth participation. Drawing upon, and adapting, the work of Israel and colleagues on participatory action research (Israel et al., 1995), I note that specific characteristics of youth photovoice projects include: (1) the involvement of young people in all aspects of the research; (2) a co-learning process in which youth, policy makers, and researchers contribute to and learn from one another's expertise; (3) a reflective process that involves education for critical consciousness; (4) an enabling process; and (5) a balance among the goals of research, action, and evaluation. In the inter-generational Flint Photovoice in which youth, adults, and policy makers all took photographs, the youth were observed as taking to the process more easily than the policy makers, one of whom commented, "Most of us are quite good at what we do. Here we are out of our element." Facilitators observed that the use of cameras helped to even the otherwise unequal playing field with regard to participants' potential contributions (Wang, 2000).

Several youth photovoice projects noted above were “open-ended,” or designed so that participants broadly photographed community issues of greatest concern to them (Photovoice Youth Empowerment Program; Flint Photovoice; Youth Empowerment Strategies!; Baltimore Youth Photovoice; Teen Photovoice). For other projects, participants were given specific themes or suggested parameters upon which to focus (Youth Violence Prevention Photovoice; Town Criers Photovoice; Picture Me Tobacco Free; Photovoice for Tobacco, Drug and Alcohol Prevention Among Adolescents in South Africa; Young Aboriginal People’s View of Sexual Health in Western Australia). The former strategy facilitates youth participation in an overall community assessment; the latter approach may be used when funding or program requirements dictate a specific area focus.

The photovoice methodology facilitates youth-adult partnerships in which each group may gain insights into each others’ worlds from which they are ordinarily insulated. Youth benefit from participating in the design and critique of policies and programs that directly affect their lives. Adults benefit by recognizing the skills and expertise of young people in contributing to the creation of policies and programs that are relevant and appropriate in content characteristics ranging from youth vernacular to needs and implementation.

For at least one project, youth voices were found to be effective for garnering media attention. In the San Francisco Bay area, Town Criers Photovoice generated a total of 9 television stories, three print media stories, and one radio story in the San Francisco Bay area, including a Sunday full front-page story in San Francisco’s major daily (May, 2001).

Despite the potential appeal of using a camera, facilitators working with youth in a range of photovoice projects have noted challenges. Some facilitators found that youth participants may require significant encouragement in completing project activities (Stevenson, 2002; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2003). Strack, Magill, and McDonagh (2003) reported that personal and family crises related to health, housing, and substance use, and stressors and competing demands, created challenges to participation for young people as well as their parents (2006). Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Carrillo, Wallerstein, and Garcia (2006) have noted that it was important for facilitators working with a fifth grade age cohort to build in opportunities for the children’s physical movement and play.

Youth participation in photovoice projects raises special ethical considerations. Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) specify for the photovoice

methodology the use of three types of written consent forms, summarized below, and in Table 2.

- Consent 1—youth photographers' signed consent to participate in project; this consent details his or her rights and responsibilities; parent or guardian must give signed consent if the young person is a minor.
- Consent 2—subjects' consent to be photographed; this consent is a signature obtained by the youth photographer and granted by any subjects *prior* to having their photograph taken.
- Consent 3—youth photographers give signed permission for pictures to be published or disseminated to promote the project's goals; this consent is usually given after all the photographs have been developed and discussed, and youth photographers have collectively identified images they wish to disseminate (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

The vulnerability of youth participants, such as through their potential tendency to downplay risks or adverse consequences of incriminating photographs, makes it essential that a parent or guardian consent signature be obtained if the youth photographer is a minor. Equally important, project facilitators are responsible for ensuring that youth participants understand that their immediate safety is paramount, and for taking every precaution possible to help minimize risks. The article "Photovoice Ethics" is critical reading for ethically implementing a

TABLE 2. Three Kinds of Consent Used in Each Photovoice Project

Type of consent	Who obtains this type of consent?	Who gives or denies this type of consent?	When is this consent obtained?
Youth photographer's consent to participate in project; this consent details the youth photographer's rights and responsibilities	Project leader or facilitator	Youth photographer If youth photographer is a minor, a parent or guardian must also provide signed consent	First workshop with youth photographers
Individual's consent to be photographed	Each youth photographer who photographs a human being	Each person photographed who is identifiable If person photographed is a minor, a parent or guardian must also provide signed consent	<i>Before</i> an individual has his/her photograph taken
Youth photographer's consent to allow specific images to be published and/or disseminated	Project leader or facilitator	Participant-photographer	After all the photographs have been developed and discussed

photovoice project involving any age group (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Youth involvement in photovoice harnesses the desire of young people to exercise autonomy and express creativity while documenting their lives. Photovoice enables young people—including those who may be underrepresented, labeled, or stigmatized, and those of “different communities and subcommunities” (Gutiérrez, 1997)—to advocate their concerns using their language and experiences. In drawing upon youth expertise, these photovoice projects concurrently promote meaningful inter-generational partnerships and infuse youth perspectives into the process of policy and program design.

Spanning all of childhood through maturity, the term “youth” includes young people with a wide range of cognitive development, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, geography, life opportunities, and many other characteristics. Much remains to be explored regarding important differences in the way that photovoice can be most effectively adapted and used by such a diversity of young individuals. In addition, because of the lightening speed in which a person of any age can become an “unwilling and embarrassed Web celebrity” (Feuer & George, 2005), the moral and privacy rights of young people and the use of their images on the Internet—not only as photovoice photographers but also as subjects—needs further scrutiny. Finally, the dilemma associated with the challenges of evaluating the relationship between youth photovoice participation and beneficial longitudinal outcomes demands more comprehensive study. Future youth and intergenerational photovoice projects will ideally incorporate youth culture, energy, and ideas into policy and program development to build a more healthful and democratic society.

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