ALL ABOUT PHOTOVOICE

http://www.photovoice.com

Photovoice Background

Photovoice blends a grassroots approach to photography and social action. It provides cameras not to health specialists, policy makers, or professionals, but to people with least access to those who make decisions affecting their lives. From the villages of rural China to the homeless shelter of Ann Arbor, Michigan, people have used Photovoice to amplify their visions and experience.

Photovoice has three goals. It enables people to record and reflect their community's strengths and problems. It promotes dialogue about important issues through group discussion and photographs. Finally, it engages policymakers. It follows the premise that, as Caroline C. Wang explains, "What experts think is important may not match what people at the grassroots think is important."

Definition

Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. It entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for social action and change, in their own communities. It uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise to create healthful public policy.

Concept

The Photovoice concept was developed by Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris and described in a series of research articles. They used three main sources to create the Photovoice concept:

- the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and documentary photography;
- the efforts of community photographers and participatory educators to challenge assumptions about representation and documentary authorship; and

- Their experience applying the process in the Ford Foundation-supported Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program.

Summary

Photovoice enables us to gain "the possibility of perceiving the world from the viewpoint of the people who lead lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world." As such, this approach to participatory appraisal values the knowledge put forth by people as a vital source of expertise. It confronts a fundamental problem of community assessment: what professionals, researchers, specialists, and outsiders think is important may completely fail to match what the community thinks is important. Most significant, the images produced and the issues discussed and framed by people may stimulate policy and social change. Photovoice is a methodology to reach, inform, and organize community members, enabling them to prioritize their concerns and discuss problems and solutions. Photovoice goes beyond the conventional role of community assessment by inviting people to promote their own and their community's well-being.

Photovoice Methodology

Goals

Photovoice has three main goals:

- to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns;
- to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs; and
- to reach policy makers.

Photovoice is highly flexible and can be adapted to specific participatory goals (such as needs assessment, asset mapping, and evaluation), different groups and communities, and distinct policy and public health issues.

Stages

The stages of Photovoice include:

- conceptualizing the problem
- defining broader goals and objectives
- recruiting policy makers as the audience for Photovoice findings
- training the trainers
- conducting Photovoice training
- devising the initial theme/s for taking pictures
- taking pictures
- facilitating group discussion
- critical reflection and dialogue
      <u>selecting</u> photographs for discussion
      <u>contextualizing</u> and storytelling
      <u>codifying</u> issues, themes, and theories
- documenting the stories
- conducting the formative evaluation
- reaching policy makers, donors, media, researchers, and others who may be mobilized to create change
- conducting participatory evaluation of policy and program implementation

Community Training and Process

The first Photovoice training begins with a discussion of cameras, ethics, and power; ways of seeing photographs; and a philosophy of giving photographs back to community members as a way of expression appreciation, respect, or camaraderie. The curriculum may then move to address mechanical aspects of camera use.

Community people using Photovoice engage in a three-stage process that provides the foundation for analyzing the pictures they have taken:

1. **Selecting** – choosing those photographs that most accurately reflect the community's concerns and assets

   The participatory approach dictates this first stage. So that people can lead the discussion, it is they who choose the photographs. They select photographs they considered most significant, or simply like best, from each roll of film they had taken.

2. **Contextualizing** – telling stories about what the photographs mean

   The participatory approach also generates the second stage, contextualizing or storytelling. This occurs in the process of group discussion, suggested by the acronym VOICE, voicing our individual and collective experience. Photographs alone, considered outside the context of their own voices and stories, and would contradict

the essence of Photovoice. People describe the meaning of their images in small and large group discussions.

3. **Codifying** – identifying the issues, themes, or theories that emerge

   The participatory approach gives multiple meanings to singular images and thus frames the third stage, codifying. In this stage, participants may identify three types of dimensions that arise from the dialogue process: issues, themes, or theories.

   They may codify issues when the concerns targeted for action are pragmatic, immediate, and tangible. This is the most direct application of the analysis. They may also codify themes and patterns, or develop theories that are grounded in data that have been systematically gathered and analyzed in collective discussion.

Conclusion

Photovoice turns on involving people in defining issues. Such an approach avoids the distortion of fitting data into a predetermined paradigm; through it we hear and understand how people make meaning themselves, or construct what matters to them. Photovoice, to paraphrase Glik, Gordon, Ward, Kouame, and Guessan, is not simply the shuffling of information around, but entails people reflecting on their own community portraits and voices and on what questions can be linked into more general constructs or can be seen to be interrelated. It is a method that enables people to define for themselves and others, including policy makers, what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed.

About the Founder: Caroline Wang

Caroline Wang is assistant professor of health behavior and health education at the School of Public Health, University of Michigan. She earned her BA (in art, media, and politics) from Duke University, and both a masters and a doctorate in public health at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1992 Wang, working with Dr. Mary Ann Burris, created what is now known as "Photovoice" as a way to enable women living in the remote countryside of Yunnan Province, China, to successfully influence the policies and programs that affected them. Since then, homeless men and women in Ann Arbor, Michigan; youth and adults in Flint, Michigan, and "town crier" youth in the San Francisco Bay area have used Photovoice to reach — and touch — policy makers, journalists, and others with influence.

The Photovoice methodology has been adopted as a tool for assessing grassroots needs and assets, and for evaluation, by diverse populations nationally and internationally. The work has also been recognized by the public health education and health promotion section of the American Public Health Association which honored Wang with its Early Career Award in 2000. Her articles on the Photovoice method and community-based public health work appear in American Journal of Public Health, Journal of Health Communication, Social Science and Medicine, and other peer-reviewed publications. Wang is co-editor of the book Visual Voices: 100 Photographs of Village China by the Women of Yunnan Province and editor of Strength to Be: Community Visions and Voices.