UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Introduction

Photovoice is a participatory action research method which provides cameras to a group of individuals and asks them to record their experiences over a period of time (Wang and Burris, 1997). The photographs taken by participants are subsequently used as catalysts for discussion. 'Photovoice' is so called because it aims to allow the photographic image to become the participants' voice in order to communicate their experiences to a variety of different audiences. Originally developed by Wang and Burris as a way to improve reproductive health policy for women in rural China, Photovoice has three primary goals: (1) to enable participants to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and (3) to reach stakeholders (both policy makers and the general public) who are able to enact change (Wang and Burris, 1997).

Photovoice is a particularly relevant method for the field of Nursing because of its historical concern for social justice (Boutain, 2005). Photovoice is similarly rooted in the ideas of social justice and emphasises individual and community empowerment through participation. Likewise, it is important for nurses to possess an understanding of the lived experiences of their own patients. This is particularly the case with those who are marginalised or those whose needs are unrecognised, or where nurses and others may struggle to understand how best to act in a practice situation (Rolfe, 2016). Successful use of this method could assist healthcare professionals and policy makers to better understand and make better informed choices about health policy and health care (Plunkett, Leipert and Ray, 2013).

Characteristics of Photovoice

Guided by research questions and prompts, participants are tasked with taking photographs of the meaningful elements (including objects, landscapes, events, and people)of their lives as it relates to a given research topic (Najib Balbale *et al.*, 2014). Within this broad approach, there are many variations a Photovoice study can take. One example of a Photovoice study which was conducted for doctoral research aimed to investigate how Photovoice could be used to investigate recovery from problematic substance use (Smith *et al.*, 2021). For this study, participants were invited to attend a Photovoice workshop where they discussed the history of Photovoice, completed digital camera training, and decided what theme they would like to focus their photographs on. Participants then took photos over one month and completed interviews individually, using the photographs that they took as a way to discuss their recovery journeys and experiences.

Participants in this study reported that their main motivation for participating was a desire to raise awareness of their experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2021). As such, a public exhibition of their photographs was held so that participants could engage in a dialogue with the general public. This is in contrast to other Photovoice studies which have been conducted with the specific aim of influencing policy. One such study was conducted in Liverpool to explore the perception of social inclusion of older people living in city environments (Ronzi *et al.*, 2016). Whereas project aims were decided in collaboration with recruited participants in Smith et al, facilitators for Rozi et al met with policy makers eight months before study initiation so that they could begin establishing clear links with stakeholders. This demonstrates the

divergent approaches of Photovoice studies, and how the numerous decision points will influence methodology and subsequent implementation.

Strengths and weakness of the methodology

The photographs in a Photovoice research study have the ability to trigger in-depth responses from participants and to add extra richness and depth to an interview context, particularly when researching sensitive topics (Glaw *et al.*, 2017). Using photographs in a research setting has been described by both participants and researchers as a more 'interesting' type of data collection compared to traditional methods and may retain respondents' attention and interest for longer periods of time, as well as acting as a door opener during the recruitment process (Pauwels, 2015). Additionally, allowing participants the ability to choose what to photograph (and as a consequence, what to discuss) may give the participant more control over the pace and focus of conversation in a comfortable and engaging way (Miller, 2015).

However, even if Photovoice does provide the participant with a degree of control over the research environment, this does not render the camera an automatically emancipatory tool. An individuals' enjoyment of participation is often used in the Photovoice literature as a synonym for 'empowerment', which risks portraying participants as powerless and the Photovoice method as "salvific" (Golden, 2020 p. 964). This has led some authors to caution that Photovoice is similar to the academic trend of doing 'parachute' investigations where researchers enter poor communities and 'save' individuals with their art (Fairey, 2018). This criticism can be addressed by the researcher adopting a reflexive approach which begins

with the researcher entering the field with as few preconceived notions as possible (Piper and Frankham, 2007). It is also necessary for researchers to justify the necessity of Photovoice and to describe why this method is essential to answer the proposed research questions. Researchers contemplating this method should consider how the photographs can be used to reveal issues that could not have been revealed through spoken word alone.

Photovoice research also runs the risk of being ethically problematic through the reproduction of oppressive relations of power that it aims to circumvent (Higgins, 2016). Asking participants to document the realities of their communities has the potential to be disempowering if it is not done with the goal of providing individuals a voice to speak about issues which are important to them, and instead done with the intent to discuss issues important to the researcher (Cook and Buck, 2010). It is vital to understand the power imbalances that do exist in a research context and acknowledge that power can never be distributed entirely equally between participant and researcher. This is due in part to differing access to resources and unequal stakes in the process and outcome of research endeavours. Therefore, communication in a Photovoice context should not refer to the act of a researcher exploring for information, but rather a two-way process of dialogue over time.

Conclusion

Photovoice was designed in the hope that the methodology could put a 'human face' on data while avoiding the implicit voyeurism of documentary photography (Wang, Burris and Ping, 1996 p. 1392). Photovoice attempts to counter conventional documentary practices

by putting cameras directly in the hands of people who may not otherwise have the means of telling their stories for themselves. This has the potential to allow participants to be the voice of their local communities and to create potential avenues for social action.

Nurses who wish to utilise a Photovoice methodology need to consider the complex ethical issues relating to capturing, analysing, storing, and disseminating visual data. A critical approach is needed to justify research decisions as well as to support adherence to the professional codes and guidance that regulate a nurses' actions (Doody and Noonan, 2016). Nurses should consider what their aim of a study is and be able to defend Photovoice as an appropriate methodology, both to answer their research questions and to be able to contribute any findings to the practical knowledge of nursing.

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