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Photovoice to Improve Postsecondary Success Among
Foster Care Emerging Adults

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In 2018, there were 437,283 youth and young adults in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018), and recent estimates suggest that one in 10 young adults experience homelessness each year (Samules et al., 2019). Federally, \$9.5 billion dollars support child welfare services including \$8.5 billion for foster care and permanency and support (Stoltzfus, 2018). Additionally, in February of 2020, the Trump Administration proposed \$4.79 billion dollars to fight homelessness in 2021 (HUD Public Affairs, 2020). Yet, even with federal financial support, many foster care emerging adults (FCEA) are aging out of care without a permanent home or education credentials (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013).

Postsecondary education is an opportunity for foster care emerging adults (FCEA) to build on protective factors that counteract some of the negative impact of former maltreatment, separation, and impermanence that foster youth often experience (Pecora, 2012, Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Post-secondary credentials can increase social capital and significantly raise chances for employment and economic success, while reducing the risk for poverty and government dependence (Liu, Vasquez, Jones, & Fong, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Federal and state policies exist to assist foster youth during the transition to adulthood and specifically to acquire higher education, yet studies show that less than 3% of those who age out of foster care earn a college degree, and many drop out of high school (2019).

Uncoincidentally, education and housing outcomes among foster youth reciprocally perpetuate each other (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011), and should be addressed congruently (Lui, Vasquez, Jones & Fong, 2019). There is an incongruence between those in power and FCEA; these young adults have expressed challenges toward being heard or included in

decisions that affect their own lives (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). There is a need for methods that strengthen community capacity and that raise youth and young adult perspectives (Schoenfeld et al, 2019).

Photovoice Methodology

Photovoice is a qualitative, participatory method rooted in feminist, critical consciousness, and document photography theories (Wang & Burris, 1997; Freire 1973). This framework aligns with photovoice's three main objectives: (1) to enable people to record and assess their community's strengths and needs (document photography); (2) to promote critical dialogue about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs (critical consciousness/empowerment; Freire, 1973; Wang and Burris 1994), and (3) advocacy by means of disseminating messages to policymakers and society at large (feminism; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). Photovoice practice was developed predominantly by Wang and Burris in order to understand the public health concerns among rural Chinese women (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice has been popularized mainly in public health and health education research, however as definitions of feminism progressively expand to include other/all oppressed and marginalized groups, photovoice, too, is raising the perspectives of those groups. There are photovoice studies to understand health experiences and perspectives of indigenous young adults (Goodman et al., 2019), community resilience of women affected by a natural disaster (Yoshihama, 2019; Scheib and Lykes , 2013), strengths and needs of youth and young adults experiencing violence (Chonody, 2012), mothers and young children in the Indian Sundarbans (Ghosh et al., 2016), young adults reentering society from juvenile detention (Shannon & Hess, 2019), small farms affected by climate change, (Bulla & Steelman, 2016), LGBTQ youth who

are struggling with homelessness (Forge et al., 2017), LGBTQ former foster youth (Capous-Desyllas & Mountz, 2019), and Native American mothers of children who have been exposed to pesticide exposure (Stedman-Smith et al., 2012).

Most photovoice studies are aligned in their perceived benefits of photovoice to empower participants and ultimately to create political change. A major premise of photovoice is consciousness, that individual perceptions about one's own life is a necessary part of thinking about reality (Friere, 1973). Participants construct photographs and engage in dialectical analysis where they become empowered to understand and act on historical, political, or social problems. Document photography is used as a "social consciousness" presented via visual imagery, and as an innovate approach to community participation and public health (Wang, 1997; Wallerstein & Berstein, 1988).

Advocacy is unique to photovoice and fueled by feminist constructs which drive participation to challenge existing oppressive operations of power (Jarldorn & 'Deer'; Karneli-Miller et al., 2009) Recent photovoice projects have accomplished advocacy in various ways such as creating post cards with participant images on them, private and public art exhibits (Frist et al., 2019), galleries attended by local decision makers, a presentation to a graduate research class (Shannon & Hess, 2019), ensuring communication with policy makers and local briefings throughout the study (Ghosh et al., 2016), or display and community dialogue in a public space (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2019). Presenting art is one way to challenge the common negative assumptions and stereotypes a particular community experiences (Desyllas, 2014).

Strengths of Photovoice Among Foster Care Emerging Adults

Photovoice is a way for young adults to create the change they desire. Research teams include the local knowledge and the situated perspectives of participants, as well as the research

expertise and political connections potentially generated by the study's authors (Maguire, 1987; Schuman et al., 2019). This democratization of the research team refutes traditional "top down" methods (Wang, 1999) and provides a way to raise the perspectives of those whose voice may be unheard.

As photovoice grows in popularity and especially among homelessness research, scholars are beginning to collect information about the type of photovoice young people may be interested in (Bender et al., 2018). Despite familiar stereotypes about the challenging nature research with youth, young people have expressed great interest in a photovoice project (Bender et al., 2018). Bender and colleagues found that not only were they significantly adept at conceptualizing social issues, the youth were interested in helping change problems like access to services, emotional support (within those service agencies), and reducing stigma toward youth who are struggling with homelessness (Bender et al., 2018). Factors that interested and motivated youth to potentially participate in a photovoice project were the opportunity to share their stories, to engage in activities that provide structure and/or are meaningful, and the creative space to use photography (Bender et al., 2018). Photovoice adapts to participants, and as a result, participants are encouraged to exercise their power in various ways, like raising their opinions and perceptions or weighing in over topics by which they are affected, like postsecondary educational outcomes.

During emerging adulthood, people are no longer adolescents, yet they may not have fully assumed adulthood roles (Arnett, 2001). In many countries, it is at this time that young people usually pursue higher education. Since it is unclear the level to which services designed to help foster youth pay for college are affecting their educational attainment (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007), photovoice could contextualize outcomes and inform federal

and state policies that are intended to support foster youth educational success (Plunkett, Leipert, & Ray, 2013; Wang and Burris, 1994). Further, as a result of a photovoice project, participants may have a better understanding of their community's resiliency and experience a higher a sense of civic connectedness (Aldridge, 2014; Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Cai, 2017). FCEA are individuals who are capable of critical thinking, group dialogue, and advocating for change on their own behalf.

Limitations of Photovoice Among Foster Care Emerging Adults

The potential benefits of photovoice for participants is largely contingent upon the rigor of the research (Wang & Hanes, 2020). A photovoice study can take a long time, even six months or longer (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh, 2004; Schumann et al., 2019) and requires proper analysis, actual empowerment, and proper recognition of intellectual property and ownership (Jarldorn & 'Deer', 2018). Even though advocacy and social action are basic tenants of photovoice, there is significant variation of advocacy efforts. While some studies contain robust advocacy, others seem to have little plan. In order to practice photovoice among groups who lack political power, it is important to show integrity to the research design and to empower participants by including them as researchers, crediting their intellectual property, and disseminating their messages to policy makers.

Evaluation

Photovoice appears in current literature as an evaluation method (Mayfield-Johnson, 2019; Krone & Diamini, 2010) and as the subject of an outcome evaluation (Postma & Ramon, 2015; Steadman-Smith, 2012; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004). However, Catalani & Minkler (2010) reviewed almost 40 published photovoice studies and found that most projects improved participant understanding, or even evaluated empowerment of the participants, but

lacked community level or long-term impact assessment (Catalina & Minkler, 2010). Since empowerment is integral to photovoice, a potential study with FCEA should ensure an evaluation of the impact and/or the processes of the study. A previous study by Postma & Ramon (2015) used a tracking tool to document capacity building exercises on a individual, organizational, and community level, two years after data collection and found that all capacities were represented, particularly on individual level, (Postma & Ramon, 2015). Or, Strack, Magill, and McDonagh, (2004) used a mixed methods approach of observation, surveys, and participant interviews to collect process and outcome data during Baltimore youth photovoice project. Photovoice teams could also use logic models to track inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes and to evaluate their photovoice projects.

Conclusion

Activism is at the heart of photovoice (Jarldorn & 'Deer', 2017). By raising young adult voices and increasing communication with those who are aging out of foster care, stakeholders can better assist foster care emerging adults (Rios & Rocco, 2017; Scannapieco et al., 2007). Photovoice is a significant undertaking that has the propensity to empower FCEA to advocate for their educational standing and opportunities. Praxis, where theory and practice meet (Jarldorn, 2018), positions participants of photovoice research to organize data from their personal and collective experiences and advocate for operational change.

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