

"Doing TIME in Athens": A Photovoice Journey With Adolescents in Search of Social Change and the Unintended Benefit of Positive Mental Health Outcomes

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Abstract

"Doing TIME (This Is My Environment) in Athens" was a photovoice project involving a group of adolescents from the town of Athens, Georgia. The purpose of the "TIME" study was to use photovoice methodology to teach participating young people how to enact social change in their community. Participants were charged with taking photographs that best represented (a) what they liked about their community and (b) what they would like to see changed. Participants took a total of 67 photographs; these were methodically narrowed down to 26 photographs using a combination of open-ended discussion questions and semistructured interview questions. The final photographs represented five themes: (a) economic injustice, (b) segregation by race and class, (c) animal rights and neglect, (d) love of the arts, and (e) a sense of belonging and pride. These photographs were then captioned, framed, and displayed at a local historic art gallery, where local residents, university officials, and policy-makers were invited to discuss the youth photographers' concerns.

Coined in the 1990s by Caroline Wang and Mary Burris, photovoice is a participatory research strategy derived from concepts and practices rooted in public health models. The participatory model emphasizes the importance of community engagement in identifying, addressing, controlling, and/or preventing public health problems within a community (Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Peabody, 2013). Involved community members are able to partner with community leaders and those outside the community, such as researchers and policy-makers, to increase colearning opportunities, knowledge, and awareness of community strengths and concerns surrounding health disparities. Through this collaborative process, community members can propose and develop action plans and intervention strategies that are appropriately directed toward improving the community's well-being through individual experiences (Hergenrather et al., 2009; Nykiforuk et al., 2011).

The photovoice process embodies the participatory model in several ways: It involves identifying a problem, recruiting individuals from diverse communities to give nuance to and critically examine the problem, and holding a community forum for policy-makers and advocates in hopes of addressing the problem. (Hergenrather et al., 2009). Provided with cameras, individual community members can photographically document their experiences and daily interactions to illustrate concerns or

challenges that prevent their community from thriving. The visual image, according to Freire, is an important tool for facilitating critical discussion of the forces that influence people's lives. Freire's philosophy played an important role (Graham et al., 2013; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Strack et al., 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997). Other theories, such as feminist theory (MacKinnon, 1989) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), also undergird photovoice; these theorists are proponents of using images to allow marginalized individuals to control and define the narrative of their community when engaging in group discussions (Graham et al., 2013; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Ostaszewska, 2018). Critical dialogue through group discussions is a crucial concept within the photovoice model (Graham et al., 2013; Strack et al., 2004; Wang, 2006). Such discussions not only bring awareness to community strengths and concerns but also allow for collective engagement and advancement of knowledge through critical reflection and dialogue (Graham et al., 2013; Ostaszewska, 2018; Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997). In turn, they establish power and ownership of community issues among community members; giving individuals the opportunity to develop a sense of self and belonging as they begin to recognize their value as assets, critical thinkers, and problem solvers (Graham et al., 2013; Haque & Eng, 2011; Strack et al., 2004). Photovoice has been shown to

help individuals, especially young people, develop skills and feel empowered (Strack et al., 2004).

Many young people “also talked at length about the insight they gained by taking pictures of positive and negative things in their community ... many had stated that being in photovoice had caused them to think about their community” (Strack et al., 2004, p. 54). The photographs taken by the youth of bars, abandoned buildings, and dilapidated schools helped the photographers see problematic issues that could increase the likelihood of violence in their communities. Through critical reflection on and discussion of their photographs, many young people were better able to visualize and articulate disadvantages that affected their communities. As a result, the photographs both raised awareness of and introduced social concerns to community leaders and people in power. With the help of photovoice, marginalized individuals can become impactful leaders and can advocate for programming, policy changes, and the well-being of their community (Graham et al., 2013; Haque & Eng, 2011; Ostaszewska, 2018; Strack et al., 2004).

The purpose of this research, “Doing TIME (This Is My Environment) in Athens,” was to educate a group of adolescents about how to enact social change in their community using photovoice. These young people wanted the focus of the project to be their community, and the researchers met with them to discuss this choice. Together, the researchers and adolescents mutually agreed on the questions that would drive the project. Using 35mm digital cameras, the participants set out to address (a) what they liked about their community and (b) what they would like to see changed in their community.

Methods

The three main goals of photovoice according to Wang and Burris (1997) are

- “to empower people to document the strengths and weaknesses of their community by photographing daily life,
- to facilitate communication and dialogue in large and small groups in order to identify important community issues, and
- to appeal to policy-makers and other people of influence in the interest of social change” (p. 369).

The opportunity for empowerment occurs when individuals are given cameras to document the issues that are important to them. Photovoice is based on the understanding that images

reveal concerns and priorities as defined by the participants themselves—who often have limited money, power, and/or status to vocalize their concerns and priorities otherwise (Wang & Burris, 1997). The second goal, within-community dialogue, is achieved via small group discussions. The combination of visual images and group discussion helps promote positive community self-advocacy, especially among group members who lack verbal fluency, as may be the case in photovoice projects involving participants whose first language is not English or adolescents who do not feel comfortable expressing their beliefs to some adults. Further, photography emphasizes action over cognition, corresponding more closely than other, more abstract modes of expression to the thinking processes of people with learning difficulties (Booth & Booth, 2003). Lastly, the third goal is achieved when participants appeal to community leaders, such as policy-makers, to advance social action that corresponds to the strengths and deficits participants have identified (Strack et al., 2004). Photovoice brings participants, community members, and community leaders together in dialogue, with the hope that the community will begin to formulate concrete solutions in response to participants’ perspectives and advocacy (Cook & Buck, 2010).

Recruitment

The community partner involved in this project, a local community activist, was key in recruiting the study participants. Not only was she very familiar with both the community and the university, but she is also a parent and could empathize with other parents who were apprehensive about allowing their children to be a part of the study. We distributed flyers in local businesses and around local schools, and we emailed recruitment flyers to several of the community partner’s advocacy groups. We attended community events and set up a recruiting table to address any concerns raised by community members, as the community and the university at that time were not on the best of terms. The adolescents were recruited from a predominantly African American community within Athens Georgia city limits. Because of the community partner’s knowledge of the population, we chose snowball sampling as one method for recruiting participants (Sedgwick, 2013): As we recruited, we asked participants if they had a friend or classmate who may also be interested in joining the project. In the current study, we used a convenience

sample of eight adolescents of color, including five young African American men, two young African American women, and one young Latina. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18.

Program Description

Once the participants were recruited, we met with them and their legal parents/guardians to fully explain the program, answer any questions, and ensure that they signed all institutional review board–approved consents. Parents/guardians were given a gas allowance for bringing the participants to the first meeting, and the participants were given \$25 gift certificates for every meeting they attended. We held a total of 12 sessions with participants (see Table 1 for session details), to which their parents/guardians were also invited. Once all documents were signed, we gave each participant a 35mm digital camera and trained them on camera use and picture-taking etiquette. For example, participants learned not to take pictures of individuals without their consent and to obtain a written consent form from any person whose photograph they wanted to use. Participants were also trained in the art of picture taking.

As another part of their extensive training, participants were given practice prompts to elicit photographs. One prompt, for example, instructed them to take a picture of something in their community that best represented them. They were given 7 days to complete this assignment. Their pictures were then displayed during the following meeting, and each participant was asked to provide a narrative of why and how their picture represented them. This exercise trained the participants on how to articulate the meaning behind their work and eased the nervousness many of them experienced around public speaking.

We held one of the sessions in a local art gallery, where participants talked with the gallery director about the art of photography and writing descriptive narratives. They were then assigned the task of captioning their photographs with the help of art gallery personnel. This exercise proved to be challenging, as participants struggled to narrow down their descriptions of their photographs to a caption. Once they were comfortable with the captioning exercise, they were given the official prompts to address with photographs:

1. What do you like about your community?
2. What would you like to see changed in your community?

These prompts were developed after an extensive discussion with the study participants. We were very careful not to shed a negative light on their community, hence the second prompt does not ask what they *do not like* about their community. This was important to the team, as we wanted participants to point out not only what they did not like but also what can be done to improve their community. Over the next three sessions, we worked with participants to narrow down their photographs to the best two or three. Then, participants developed captions for their photographs, framed and captioned the photographs, and held a practice run before the actual gallery show.

Participatory Analysis of the Data

Our sources of data are participants' photographs, the qualitative information collected from participants during group discussions about the photographs and semistructured interviews, and informal information collected during the community presentation and follow-up discussion. Participants took a total of 67 pictures, which we narrowed down to 26 for the final exhibit. Forty-one of the photographs eliminated included the practice sessions, pictures of friends having fun, video game scores, family and pet photographs, blurred or out of focus photographs, and other images unrelated to the study. The remaining photographs were displayed, shared with the participants, discussed in two small groups, and critically analyzed using the SHOWED Method. We asked group participants: What do you See here? What's really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem or strength Exist? What can we Do about this (Strack et al., 2014)? The researchers were present in the group to facilitate discussion, and a few times, we had to use prompts to elicit conversation.

Results

Themes

Five themes emerged as the researchers (including the principal investigator and two graduate research assistants) and the participants (pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants) critically examined the data.

Economic Injustice. Several photographs depicted poverty and homelessness. David A. stated, "I chose this picture because it represents struggles that are occurring in Athens" (see Figure 1). He also articulated that because of homelessness, folks

Table 1. Weekly Sessions

Session	Activity
1	Met with participants and parents/guardians to explain the study in detail and to get all appropriate releases and permissions signed
2	Provided 35mm digital cameras to all participants • Explained the mechanics of the camera • Led a basic lesson in how to take pictures • Practiced taking photographs of each other and scenery • Read camera directions to learn functions • Discussed the ethics of taking pictures of people
3	Discussed principles of photovoice • Explained signed release of images and all permissions • Undertook more detailed photography lessons from a professional photographer • Walked around campus taking pictures and interacting with practice subjects; asked for release of images from practice subjects • Downloaded practice photographs to computer • Discussed photographs and selected the two best photographs from the day's outing
4	Discussed research prompts and the use of photographs • Given an assignment to photograph something unique on campus • Downloaded photographs and discussed in detail • Given homework assignment to take a picture of something that best represents you
5	Met in the local art gallery for a session on "photography as art" with a local gallery director and chief curator • Discussed captioning photographs and the importance of brevity • Captioned the final photographs • Discussed how to "talk about a photograph" and explain why it was taken and the meaning behind it • Practiced on each other and also with the researcher and gallery personnel
6	Reviewed and discussed homework assignment • Discussed prompts for the study (given 1 week to take photographs) • Answered all lingering questions and concerns • Revisited principles of photovoice and stressed the importance of signed releases from their subjects and safety
7	Met with the participants 1 week later • Discussed the photographs and the meanings behind the pictures • Talked about selecting the very best pictures that addressed the prompts • Discussed the process they went through to get the photographs and listened as they explained how they felt taking the photos • Selected top photographs (67)
8	Reviewed the 67 photographs and selected the photographs that best addressed the prompts through group discussions and semistructured interviews. A total of 26 photographs remained.
9	Met with participants and research assistants to review photographs and arrange by themes. There were several iterations before deciding on the final themes.
10	Learned how to frame photographs; and each participant framed their photographs and wrote captions for each one.
11	Did a practice show for friends and family at a local theatre; discussed what felt good and what they would change
12	Final showing at the art gallery (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTPWYVmErXU&t=10s). • Held informal discussions with attendees on the presentation and display • Held debriefing session with participants

Figure 1. Economic Justice, Homeless Man



Figure 2. Cleared Away Homeless Camp



do not have the proper clothing to look for jobs, and because they do not have an address, it makes it hard to get government-issued identification. Denise J. talked about a homeless camp that was in her neighborhood that is no longer there. She said, “[S]ome people came and cleared the homeless camp out and I did not like that because there was no place for them to go” (see Figure 2).

Segregation by Race and Class. James F. stated, “I want to change the belief that only White folks can have nice things.” He believes that the neighborhoods in Athens are segregated by race, and if you are Black and live in a nice area, others look at you in amazement and disbelief. David A. concurred and complicated the discussion by stating,

I don’t think it’s right that people who live in project housing and [are] raised in areas where they have to struggle to maintain everyday life have to wake up and look a few feet across the street at people in mansions.

He went on to say that this could be looked at as motivation for those in the projects to aspire to want more out of life (see Figure 3). Sheila G. described the makeup of the city thus: “There is one college student side, one Black side, and one like White wealthy side just like . . . I would rather see Athens more inclusive like we say we are.” She went on to say, “Community residents should interact more. For example, college students can hang out with the locals.” She wants more opportunities for folks to come together in the community (see Figure 4). This can also be seen as a source of stress for the participants, as it is obvious to them that there is a racial divide in the community.

Animal Rights and Neglect. Jason L. and Patrick Q. expressed concern about the animals wandering the neighborhood. Jason L. stated, “I wish there were more stray cats that had homes” (See Figure 5). They believed this was unsafe for people and the animals. Patrick Q. further intimated that the wild animals were there first, so we need to find a way to cohabitate with them. He pointed out

Figure 3. A Neighborhood Divided



Figure 4. Segregation by Race



Figure 5. Animal Neglect



Figure 6. Roadkill



that “the wildlife has to eat and usually when they are in search of food, they have to sometimes cross the street which is when they get hit.” He added, “I see roadkill on a weekly basis, and I wish something could be done about it” (see Figure 6). Clearly, neglect for animals, another neighborhood stressor, surfaced in the photographs.

Love of the Arts. A large majority of the participants expressed a strong affinity for the artwork displayed around town. These works are in the form of sculptures and wall art or graffiti. Jason stated, “It [art] is a part of Athens that can’t be changed. It shows people’s experiences, people’s lives, their thoughts.” Jeffery M. added, “I like this [artwork] about Athens because you can see pieces of art around the town.” He also pointed out that

many artworks are being painted over or moved for businesses, like the mural of the wise old man (see Figure 8) that was torn down for a gas station in the middle of our project. Jeffery M. further observed that “when people think of Athens, they think about the University of Georgia, and they do not think about our artistic side” (see Figures 7 and 8).

A Sense of Belonging and Pride. Many participants expressed a strong interest in their respective churches and described how the church members are considered family. According to Jeffery M., “[T]here are a lot of churches that are welcoming to people and it’s a place where you can feel safe.” Melody H. and Dedra V. both expressed a strong like for their schools. Both seemed to feel that school was a great place to learn, meet people,

Figure 7. Shiny Animal



Figure 8. The Wise Old Man

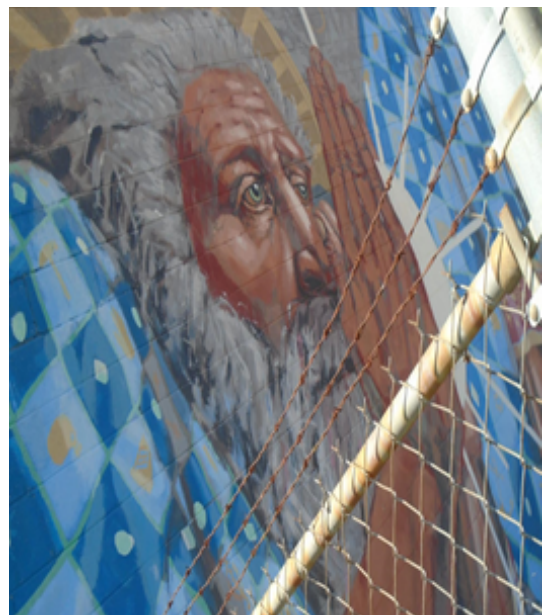


Figure 9. Friendships Garnered



Figure 10. Socializing and Chess



Figure 11. Locally Owned



and hang out with friends (See Figures 9 and 10). In addition, Melody H. stated, “Athens is a place where education is taken seriously.”

Moreover, many participants were very proud of the fact that Athens is home to many small and independent businesses (see Figures 10 and 11). This is evident in the downtown area, where there are few chain establishments, and the majority are independently owned stores and restaurants. Patrick Q. and David A. both agreed that they appreciate the many events that take place in the community. For example, a local, independently owned pizza parlor puts on “Chess and Pizza,” a weekly event that hosts chess games and provides pizza to local kids (see Figure 10). Another local event, the “Black History Bowl,” is an annual

competition in Athens that allows participants to showcase their knowledge of Black history. These photographs depict the adolescents’ positive attitudes toward their neighborhood.

Advocates for Change

The study culminated in a gallery event at a local historic art gallery in Athens. Invitations to the event were sent to the mayor, town commissioners, community group leaders, and university officials. In total, approximately 70 folks attended. The event allowed the participants to speak directly to local policy-makers and community members and to describe in detail the changes they would like to see in their community. The attendees were pleasantly surprised by the level of interest

the adolescents showed in their community and by the thoughtfulness of their suggested changes. Participants' guardians expressed a strong desire to see the project continue, as they noticed positive changes in their children. The participants were amazed that adults actually listened to them, and many wanted the project to continue because they had more to say. Judging from the informal feedback from many of the attendees who communicated with the principal investigator, the project was successful. Photovoice proved to be an excellent medium to teach adolescents how to enact social change through the use of photography, as evidenced by their photographic display and presentation (see a video documenting their experiences [here](#)).

Implications for Policy

Using photovoice in small communities can be effective for raising awareness of issues facing a community, as local policy-makers are usually familiar with the participants and/or their guardians. Moreover, the participants are very aware of the social issues their communities face. Photovoice can highlight social problems affecting adolescents, such as alcohol and drug use (Goodhart et al., 2006), risky behavior (Wang, 2006), and health concerns (Findholt et al., 2011; Necheles et al., 2007), because the youth are often the ones closest to the problem. More importantly, photovoice can empower adolescents to be change agents in their communities because the process trains them not only to identify the problem but also to offer possible solutions.

In this study, youth engagement in photovoice revealed that the participating youth of Athens are deeply reflective and carry concerns encompassing structural, environmental, and relational issues affecting their lives and their city. Their insights about economic justice, residential segregation, animal rights, the arts, and community pride and belonging reveal that youth may be key stakeholders to engage for change. As they are unable to vote, photovoice may be an effective strategy for engaging youth voices and facilitating civic engagement. This project is an example of an entry point to such action; our goal is to collaborate with study participants to influence key decision-makers to consider policy solutions to the issues highlighted in the project. Moreover, and most importantly, neighborhood stressors have a severe impact on adolescents' mental health, and these issues oftentimes carry on into adulthood (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Hull et

al., 2008; Kessler et al., 1997). Therefore, steps should be taken to help instill community pride in adolescents, perhaps through targeted events similar to the community chess events and Black History Bowl.

Conclusion

Photovoice has proven to be an excellent methodology for working with adolescents, as it enables them to illustrate their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on social justice issues through photographs. Moreover, according to Peabody (2013), "Photovoice [is] a powerful means for increasing the critical consciousness of students and helping them to learn how to use a meaningful tool for working with communities for social justice" (p. 264). This was apparent during the photovoice exhibit. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher conducted a processing session with the participants in which they discussed the exhibit and their general feelings about the photovoice process. The resounding response can be best expressed by Melody H., who said with a big smile on her face, "[T]his was great, I thought I would be nervous, but I wasn't. I can't believe the mayor actually talked to me and asked me about my pictures." Another student echoed the response and added, "He even told me that he was impressed by the whole show." This student then asked, "Can we do this again?" We surmise that one of the main reasons this was an efficacious study was because 53% of young people under 11 years of age have a cell phone, and 84% of all teens have their own cell phone (Kamenetz, 2019), so taking pictures is a part of their culture. The researcher only had to encourage them to believe that they could be change agents, to trust that their voices matter, and to see that the photographs were a way to express their thoughts visually.

Reflection

After the exhibit was dismantled, the researcher and graduate assistants reflected on the process and realized that working with adolescents can be rewarding. It can also be challenging, however, in the sense that adolescent participants do not control their own calendars, nor do they adhere to the rigors of a research study in the way that we have learned to expect from adult participants. For instance, none of the participants were of legal driving age. Their guardians had to transport them to and from the meetings. This meant that we had to work around the guardians' availability. Moreover, many of the guardians

did not have transportation, nor was public transportation an option, so the researcher and a graduate assistant had to transport some of the participants to and from each session, which at times was challenging. Another challenge was that most of the meetings were held after school. To compensate for the inconvenience, we provided a meal for the participants and the guardians who stayed for the duration of the meeting.

Another interesting discovery involved communicating with the participants. Most participants did not have voicemail set up on their cell phones, so if we called and they were not able to answer the phone, we could not leave messages. Moreover, when we sent group texts to the participants, most of them did not respond. When asked face-to-face if they saw the messages, the answer was that they had seen them but did not think a response was necessary. This discovery led us to include the guardians on the text chain, too; however, many of them would not respond to the group text, either. Overall, the lesson we learned about communicating is to use multiple means. For example, we texted, emailed, and called guardians and participants. Moreover, the participants were easily bored, so we had to make the meetings interesting to keep them coming back. We originally recruited 16 participants, and despite our best efforts, only eight completed the study. We lost some of the participants to after-school activities, so for the next study, we will have alternative meetings on the weekends for those who are occupied during the week.

Working with adolescents can be eye-opening and fulfilling, but we had to keep an open mind and be flexible. We were honest when we did not understand something they said or did. We just asked, and we found they were willing to explain their colloquialisms to us. Additionally, we kept our community partner involved in every step of the process, and this helped remove obstacles that we encountered working in a community where we did not reside. Our community partner knew many of the participants and/or their guardians, which helped recruitment and retention. Involving the community partner in every step of the process helped to build and maintain trust. Most importantly, the community partner's schedule was not like that of a university professor/researcher. She experienced delays due to personal/family matters, and unexpected events that occurred throughout the study that

required understanding, flexibility, and an open approach to this new way of learning for the university researchers. The community partner also experienced the bureaucracy of the university system's Institutional Review Board and guidelines regarding research with human subjects. She was frustrated with the permissions required before we could begin the study.

Using photovoice as a tool for community engagement with adolescents was promising because, as we found, adolescents have opinions about their environment and the changes they would like to see. Using this methodology empowered the youth to speak out about these changes in a forum of people that have the power to make them. Photovoice is a true community engagement tool because the participants are also the researchers, and in this instance, the youth, not the faculty partner, presented their findings to the community. More often than not, researchers go into communities and collect data, write grants, and then leave. We found this was a major concern in this particular community, as community members are being heavily researched by almost every college in the university. With the help of the community partner, we assuaged any doubts community members had about our project.

Overall, an unintended finding involved the effects that neighborhoods can have on mental health outcomes: "The more threatening the neighborhood, the more common the symptoms of depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder" (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996, p. 293; Ruck et al., 2019). Several studies have found that normative and daily stresses—for example, worrying about race and economic conditions—are related to psychological symptoms during adolescence (Compas et al., 1993). Aneshensel and Sucoff (1996) found that adolescents' perceptions of their neighborhood as a dangerous space negatively impact their mental health. Positive perceptions of their neighborhood, therefore, could have a positive effect on their mental health. As social work researchers, we were prepared to make referrals for any of the participants that exhibited mental health issues. We still maintain some communication with the participants today, and we offer our time to parents/guardians for academic advice and resources in the community. True community engagement requires more than just a research study.

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