Photovoice and Other Participatory Research Methods Are Promising Avenues for Data Collection

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Introduction

Photovoice is a participatory research method that allows participants to serve as the "experts of their own lives."[i] By sharing pictures that they took and reflecting on their experiences, participants are able to express and facilitate interpretation of their own stories. Photovoice can also promote the collection of more culturally relevant data because participants themselves drive the data collection.[ii] For example, the photovoice method has been well-received in many Native communities, where researchers and participants often work hard to ensure that participants' values and traditions are captured in data.[ii] Photovoice has been used in the public health field for several years to focus on and interpret topics like substance misuse,[iii] the ways in which adolescents understand love,[iv] and people's perceptions of their physical environments.[v] However, although photovoice has been used with adolescents and young adults in a variety of settings, there has been limited[vi, vii] photovoice research in the workforce development sector.

For the Generation Work study, we used photovoice in 2020/21 to better understand the experiences of young adult participants who have participated in Generation Work, an initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This initiative began in 2016 and works with five local partnerships around the country to incorporate three strands of work—positive youth development (PYD), demand-driven employment training, and racial equity work—to support young adults disconnected from the labor force or schooling.[viii]

This brief focuses on sharing information about the structure and process of using photovoice to garner insight into young adult experiences with workforce development. We describe the methods used to gather information from young adult Generation Work participants in Hartford, CT and Indianapolis, IN. After describing these methods, we highlight key lessons and insights for other programs or researchers considering implementing a photovoice data collection process. For more detailed discussion of the themes and results that emerged from the photovoice exercise, see our themes brief.

Using photovoice for data collection

Photovoice can be used as a data collection method, an intervention, and a tool for community or civic change. This brief primarily focuses on photovoice for data collection, but we describe the second and third uses in an appendix at the end of the brief. As a data collection method, photovoice is often used to incorporate participant voice and perspective more explicitly into research than commonly employed in other, more traditional data collection methods. Additionally, by providing participants with the space to creatively answer questions, photovoice can garner broader responses than other data collection modalities. For example, the present study showed that many participants used photos to share their engagement in self-care, despite the fact that self-care was not a part of our original conceptual model or present in initial interviews with participants. Thus, photovoice was able to capture a consistent theme that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Why we chose photovoice

As part of the Generation Work initiative, we initially intended to write youth profiles in 2018 to capture youth perspectives on Generation Work's use of PYD approaches in programming. However, after conducting short interviews with participants, it became clear that building rapport with young people would be challenging when we (the interviewers) were only present at the program for a short site visit. In response to this challenge, we began to think about ways to conduct in-person interviews that would allow us to learn about a young person's life, such as ethnographic methods or opportunities to follow them around for "a day at work." Shortly after we started this process, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Since we were no longer able to travel for data collection, we began to consider methods that would allow us to gather perspectives through means other than traditional interviews, while remaining interesting to participants. In addition to meeting these criteria, the photovoice approach resonated with our study team and aligned with the PYD perspective we were studying in the larger project. Specifically, we were drawn to the method's ability to allow participants to not only decide what they wished to share about themselves, but also to decide how to describe or convey a response visually. Photovoice provides respondents with more ways to express themselves than a traditional interview or focus group. Therefore, we designed a study with interviews and photovoice components (including both focus groups and a final interview to discuss the photos) to allow us to collect data individually, in a way that could capture more of participants' own narratives about themselves.

Methodology and Data

Participants

Our team recruited participants from September 2020 to January 2021. We worked with Generation Work program staff in two sites (Hartford and Indianapolis) to explain the project. Program staff then recommended current or previous participants who met our three criteria for young adults who 1) had participated in Generation Work programs in Hartford or Indianapolis, 2) were age 18 or older, and 3) who might be interested in taking photos. After identifying potential young adult participants, we emailed or called to schedule a quick chat to assess their interest in participating and conduct a consent process. This process did not differ greatly from how we might have recruited for a simple interview. The programs recommended 12 participants total, of whom five completed all data collection activities (three males and two females).

Data Collection Activities

In this photovoice study, we collected data through three methods: surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Participants were paid for each activity in which they participated. If they participated in all activities, they could earn a total of $120 (dollar amounts for each activity are noted in Table 1 below):

Table 1. Data Collection Activities

Activity	N	Description
Demographic survey	12	This demographic survey was used to capture key information, including age, gender, and employment status. Two potential participants were not eligible for the study based on their age.
Pre-interview ($25)	10	We completed a pre-interview to get an introduction to participants and their experiences in the program they attended. The interview questions for this were roughly based on the five domains in the PILOT tool. (The five domains captured in this acronym are: **P**ositive relationships, **I**mproved skills, **L**inkages to other resources, **O**pportunities to contribute and belong, **T**rusting and safe spaces)
Photovoice training ($15)	6	This one-time training introduced photovoice principles using a website and explained how to take pictures to tell a story. We attempted to schedule this training with all participants who were interviewed.
Taking photos	5	Participants were sent prompts every other day and encouraged to take pictures related to each prompt.
Photovoice focus groups ($40)	5	The focus groups were offered in small groups (3 in the first group, 2 in the second). We prepared slides with pictures that the participants submitted online and discussed at least 3 pictures using a framework called the "SHOWeD" framework. This framework uses the letters in the word "SHOWeD[ix]" to focus on: 1. What participants **See** in the picture 2. What is really **Happening** in the picture 3. How this relates to **Our** [participants'] lives 4. **Why** this situation or experience occurred 5. How this image could **Educate** others 6. What participants could **Do** about the experience or situation
Post-interviews ($40)	5	In the final interview, we shared key themes that had emerged from interviews, photovoice, and the focus groups and asked participants to review the themes. We asked them to flag whether we had misunderstood or misrepresented anything and to raise additional ideas that they thought were important.

Taking photos. Between the photovoice training and focus groups, we sent prompts every other weekday for four weeks. The prompts were sent via text message; we used REDCap, a secure web application for building and managing online surveys and databases, to send the texts. In total, we sent 12 prompts (see Table 2, below) and asked that participants take one or more pictures for each prompt. Of the five participants who took photos, some responded to all prompts, while others only responded to the first few or the ones that seemed most meaningful to them. Participants were asked to upload their photographs onto the photovoicekit.org website (a website designed to support the collection of photovoice data), provide a short description, and think about each of the guiding questions in the SHOWeD activity. Some

participants completed and sent us the forms and others just discussed their answers during the focus group.

Table 2. Twelve Prompts Sent to Participants to Guide Their Photos

1. Take a picture of the best part of your day today.
2. Take a picture of something you want staff at your program to know about you.
3. Take a picture of where you feel most yourself or feel most comfortable about who you are.
4. Take a picture of something that reminds you of being supported by someone.
5. Take a picture of something that reminds you of a really good relationship.
6. Take a picture of something that would make workforce trainings better.
7. Take a picture of something that makes it easy OR difficult to find and keep a job or to succeed in the training program.
8. Take a picture of something that makes you feel like you belong.
9. Take a picture of something that reminds you of what trust looks like to you.
10. Take a picture of what safety looks like in your program or workplace (or what you would want it to look like).
11. Take a picture of something that you do well.
12. Take a picture of how you learn best or the environment that helps you learn (or what you would want it to look like).

Considerations for Researchers

This discussion section highlights several lessons that might be useful to other organizations as they consider using photovoice as an intervention or data collection tool.

Photovoice elicited salient information that was not necessarily captured in interviews.

Integrating even a small photovoice component into a research or evaluation study may provide insights that would not be captured using other data collection methods (e.g., surveys and one-time interviews).

As programs consider prompts to offer participants, they may find it useful to think broadly. Broad prompts allowed us to gather a diverse range of personal stories and experiences that were not otherwise captured during interviews or focus groups. Participant responses informed the following takeaways:

- **Photovoice helped build trust and familiarity with participants over time.**

  o While one participant never mentioned a son in her interview—despite being asked about child caretaking responsibilities—the first photo she submitted on photovoice was of her shoes and her son's shoes next to each other (see right). We believe this participant began to feel comfortable talking about being a mom after we got to know her over multiple interactions and then provided her the opportunity to share an image.

- o   While another respondent shared information about his struggles before participating in the Indianapolis Generation Work program, his picture of a text message exchange with one of his program leaders helped us better understand how his trust in program staff developed slowly. He initially struggled to trust that staff were on his side but—after a two steps forward, one step back process—he slowly began to trust and rely on staff.

- **Photovoice, with its broad prompts, encouraged participants to share more about their lives.** In general, photovoice let us learn more about respondents' lives—like their hobbies, families, and personal motivations—through glimpses at things in their environments: walks in the countryside, a familiar object at home, the sense of peace from looking out at a snowy evening (see right), or a gift from a friend. While interviews often seek to elicit information about these experiences, relationships, or thoughts, it can be challenging to encourage people to think more broadly.

- **Photovoice may benefit research collection by giving participants more time to respond than they would receive in a traditional interview.** For instance, in an hour-long interview, a participant may feel pressured to answer relatively quickly and without nuance. With photovoice, they can take time to more thoroughly consider prompts and move at their own pace.

Photovoice can be a creative exercise that is engaging to participants.

In our short interviews with young adults who had been referred by program staff in 2019, we were not able to gather enough narrative depth to write profiles. Thus, we hoped that photovoice would allow us to more deeply engage with young adult participants. To this end, while only half of the young adults referred to us participated in photovoice, the ones who did shared much more nuanced and detailed information about their lives. During the photovoice training, we used some of our own photos as concrete examples of how to respond to a prompt and complete the SHOWeD worksheet. This allowed us to model the use of photos to provide insight about our lives.

Participants' experiences with the photovoice process informed the following takeaways:

- **Encouraging participants' creativity via methods like photovoice may be more engaging than other data collection methods.** Young people are used to taking pictures on their phones and other devices, and many told us directly that they enjoyed photography and other art forms. Each participant stated that this opportunity to be creative was an interesting aspect of the study.

- **Taking photos may help participants identify their values.** Participants sometimes found it difficult to think of something to take a picture of, or to avoid taking pictures of certain things (e.g., other people or brands). Still, they were happy with what they submitted, and the focus group helped each identify the personal significance of the photos they shared.

- **Methods like photovoice allow participants to share their experiences in their own voices**. Photovoice gives participants agency—in other words, a feeling of control over their own lives and outcomes—by allowing them to choose what to photograph and what photos to share, tell stories about why a photo or story is important, and create a narrative to relate photos to their life and experience in the program. One participant said:

    "I don't speak about myself or tell about my experience [often]. I'm more of the introvert. I usually keep quiet and to myself ... I liked the prompts coming out, and talking about our own experience and making the most of it. Super fun and something new, something refreshing somehow."

- **Researchers must ensure that participants feel that their profiles (or other documentation of their values and experiences) are accurate and fair.** At each stage of the project, we reassured participants that what they shared would only be identifiable if they chose. All five of the photovoice participants agreed to be identified and to share materials. In the last interview, we asked some final questions about PYD practices and told participants what we expected their profile themes would be. We believe that this openness throughout the process encouraged participants to feel more comfortable and to engage more fully.

Photovoice required some logistical management, and programs integrating photovoice will need to prepare and exhibit flexibility.

- **Many participants did not communicate regularly over email.** Texting them for check-ins may have increased follow-up.

- **Photovoice requires multiple meetings and activities, which may make participation difficult for young adults with complex lives.** Many of these young adults have multiple demands on their time (e.g., jobs, children, schooling), while others navigate stressful and challenging situations (e.g., housing instability, family tension, etc.). As noted, not all participants continued throughout the duration of the activity.

- **While the ability to connect virtually allowed us to complete this study, "Zoom fatigue" was a reality for many people over the last year and our participants were no different.** It was critical to find ways to be flexible and responsive to participants' needs and schedules.

The interactive nature of the focus group discussion helped identify additional themes and fostered opportunities for peer connection.

Discussion created opportunities for peer-to-peer learning (some initiated by us and some that developed naturally).

- **Interactive, peer-to-peer conversations were fruitful: Participants built off each other's ideas, supported other participants' successes, and empathized with challenges.** In one instance, a participant talked about how he was applying for college but did not feel very organized. In response, the other two respondents—both of whom were older—provided reassurance. In another instance, one participant spoke about how another's journey to college—which had not taken the exact path she had imagined—had inspired him to apply to college and rethink his own academic future.

- **At other times, in response to a question, respondents delved deeply into a concept or experience.** For example, one respondent shared a photo of a crumpled piece of paper. She described how, once a paper is creased and bent, it is hard to make it fresh again. She compared this to the difficulty of repairing trust once it is broken. However, she added that it is still possible to use the paper, much like new kinds of trust can be built based on what people need and how they communicate.

- **The individual nature of responding to prompts and taking pictures allows for a variety of interpretations and pictures.** Different participants interpreted the prompts in diverse ways that allowed their creativity to shine. For example, for the prompt about a good relationship, one person took a picture of a peanut butter jar next to a jelly jar. She wrote about the peanut butter and jelly:

"Peanut butter and jelly reminds me of a good relationship. They're both very different but go well together. Peanut butter is more sticky and I believe all relationships need that stickiness like peanut butter. That stickiness can be the concept of trust or communication, which is very important. Jelly on the other hand, spreads easier onto the bread and it adds some more taste. It's not always a bad thing to add more taste to relationships, trying new things with your partner or best friend like going to new places and on different adventures. A good relationship needs balance, having differences can be a good thing."

- **The "peanut butter and jelly" respondent interpreted the good relationship prompt very conceptually, but a second person shared a more literal interpretation—with a photo of his goddaughter, who is a source of motivation for him.** The opportunity to take, and then share, photos allowed each participant to think individually about a prompt before joining the group discussion. Although there was value in building off each other's ideas in the group discussion, participants were also able to use photovoice to present their own thoughts and experiences without the influence of other group members' responses (e.g., without any worry that their answer was "right"). This method also ensured that the way in which the interviewer asked questions did not shape participants' responses; the prompts were asked in exactly the same way (e.g., through REDCap) for every person.

The use of prompts that were both conceptually grounded and varied elicited a range of responses.

We used the PILOT domains (described above) as the conceptual framework for the prompts sent to participants. However, some prompts resulted in more photos for discussion than others.

- **Respondents noted that the harder prompts asked about systems or environments.** Thus, including a mix of individual-, system-, and environment-focused prompts may lend itself to a wider range and varied number of photo responses. Some of these photos may be easier to discuss, while others may require a bit more probing on the part of the facilitator.

- **Specifically, prompts about relationships, feeling supported, the best part of a participant's day, or something participants are good at more often elicited photos for discussion, whereas photos about systems tended to be less nuanced or harder for participants to talk about.** For example, prompts about what a workforce training program could do better, factors that make it easy to keep a job or succeed in a program, or how the respondent learns best were discussed less and were more likely to be skipped by some respondents.

Online tools were important for easing implementation.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated remote and virtual connections, online tools helped us support recruitment, training, and data collection. Specifically, these tools allowed us to be flexible and offer trainings on a rolling basis and allowed participants to submit their pictures whenever they were ready.

- **We developed tracking systems to keep in touch with participants who were interested in participating in the photovoice activity.** A spreadsheet to track who had completed which tasks helped us stay on target, while the online messaging system to send prompts helped track which prompts were sent to whom, and when.

- **We conducted interviews, trainings, and focus groups using online videoconferencing software that could be accessed from a computer, tablet, or phone.** This made participation easier and more accessible for many participants by removing the requirement that they drive somewhere and attend in-person; however, this format required regular follow-ups to ensure that participants did not forget about the meeting.

While maintaining engagement through multiple forms of communication was imperative to successful involvement at each stage of the project, flexibility was also important.

Because of the pandemic, several people we initially interviewed were not able to continue in the study due to competing demands like new jobs/internship opportunities, child care responsibilities, housing instability, and other factors.

- **Identifying at least two ways of contacting each person helped us reach them more regularly.** These methods were typically a phone number and an email. Sometimes it took multiple tries with each method to reach a participant or to follow up. Many participating young adults work in jobs where they are not in front of a computer all day—for example, as medical aids, nurses, or auto shop workers—so email was not always the best way to reach them. Due to Child Trends' data security policies, we were only able to text participants through REDCap; while prompts could be sent to participants' phones via text, they could not respond via text. This was limiting, and texting with the opportunity to message back and forth may have been more effective.

- **If funds and time allow, oversampling and recruiting more participants than necessary can help ensure a sufficient sample size.** Based on our experiences with dropout in the current study, other researchers may consider this strategy when determining the appropriate funding level for their own study.

- **It was critical to structure the study to work around young adults' complex schedules.** Because young adults have many competing demands for their time and energy, we tried to create flexible conditions for participants by allowing them to upload photos when they had time and attend trainings offered at different times. We were able to check in with participants who were not engaging at all, or send a message to say, "Thanks for uploading a photo!" The study team should consider how best to respect each young person's time and which incentives are most appropriate and proportional to their participation. We did this by regularly making ourselves available and able to talk on the phone when needed (including evenings and weekends), asking for participants' availability for focus group scheduling (rather than just sending a time), conducting focus groups later in the evening (e.g., 7:00 pm), and allowing a baby to attend one interview.

- **It's important to consider how dropout may skew sample demographics.** Assessing whether the participants in our study were different than the average participant is challenging; however, participants who are not able to continue in a study may be facing more challenges. If reaching the most vulnerable program participants is a key study objective, researchers should be able to identify the key barriers for participants and address them (through scheduling, getting to know participants in-person prior to the study, offering different incentives, etc.).

Conclusion

While our goal was to have eight participants complete the photovoice activity, using this method helped us develop better participant rapport—even with fewer participants (n = 5)—and gather insights into the types of support that helped young adults succeed. This process provided more depth than our short interviews in prior years. Each of this year's participants shared enough of their stories for us to develop profiles, which are further enhanced by the participants' photos. In addition to gathering nuanced information, remote data collection using photovoice was also cost-effective and efficient. Although photovoice may be stronger in person, with more opportunities to check in with participants, the method translated well to videoconferencing calls given pandemic restrictions. Additionally, photovoice was well-received by participants, who told us that they found it engaging and interesting. Ultimately, photovoice encouraged a level of creativity not otherwise found in interviews and focus groups.

While it was challenging to keep track of busy young adults with other demands (school, jobs, families, etc.), it was essential that we be flexible and use tools that were easy for participants to access. Additionally, working with participants to ensure that their profiles were accurate and fair facilitated their comfort and engagement. Based on these promising findings, photovoice is a method for both data collection and intervention that could facilitate working with and learning from adolescents and emerging adults.

Appendix

Multiple Uses of Photovoice

Photovoice can be used as a data collection method, an intervention, and a tool for community or civic change. We described the first method in the body of this brief and will describe the second and third uses here.

As an intervention, photovoice might be used as part of a curriculum or to facilitate discussions about particular topics of interest to a program. For instance, a Hawai'i-based substance use prevention program that focused on adolescents in Native Hawai'ian communities uses photovoice in its weekly program to engage young people and develop leadership skills.[iii, x] Specifically, by creating opportunities for teenagers to share their perspectives, talk about their experiences, and make linkages between their own experiences and those of others (or their community), the program is focused on developing community leaders. Photovoice allows participants to share images of some of their native community's perceptions of health and responsibility. This is important for two reasons: 1) It provides youth an opportunity to discuss community through a mechanism other than verbal communication and 2) it allows them to present their own definitions of health rather than respond to a researcher's conceptualization of health.

Many photovoice initiatives also use the images and accompanying captions or narrative to generate community change. Some programs use photovoice exhibits to spark community conversation, advocate for change, or more publicly elevate voices that are not often heard. While our photovoice activity focused primarily on data collection, we consider the profiles we are sharing to accompany this brief to be a way to highlight how young adults themselves perceive PYD supports in these two programs. Specifically, the only way to know whether a young person is being supported in a positive, developmentally appropriate way is to ask whether they feel positively supported in appropriate ways! These short profiles can capture youth voice and encourage programs interested in incorporating PYD approaches to hear what is important to young adults themselves.

Methods

Here, we share additional details about each step in the data collection process of the present study.

Short demographic survey. Before we met with participants, we sent them a short demographic survey to capture initial information, including their age, gender, employment status, and the professional field in which they were working or training. This background information was collected through REDCap.

Interviews. Participants were asked to participate in two interviews, one at the beginning of the study before the training and another at the end of the study after the photovoice activity. In the pre-interview, we asked participants how they had first heard about the workforce program and about their experiences in the program. Based on our interest in understanding how young adult participants experienced the PYD approaches with which staff engaged, we developed a set of questions that focused on skills learned, relationships with staff, extent of staff support, and current job or continued education. In the final interview, we asked whether there were any updates to participants' education, training, or employment status, and discussed key themes that had emerged from interviews and the photovoice activity. Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, an online video conferencing system. Researchers took detailed notes and were able to access Microsoft Teams-generated transcriptions, which were analyzed to identify the most important themes for each participant.

Focus group. After participants submitted photos, the Child Trends team reviewed the pictures and the descriptions provided, and selected some or all pictures to discuss in more detail during the focus group.

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