Photovoice and House Meetings as Tools Within Participatory Action Research

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Participatory action research (PAR) is an epistemology where community members and researchers collaborate to (a) determine the problem to be researched, (b) collect data, (c) analyze data, (d) come to a conclusion, (e) determine an intervention, (f) implement the intervention, and (g) evaluate the intervention (Fals Borda, 1987). We refer to PAR as an epistemology rather than as a method because most PAR theorists view it as a way for those typically situated outside of science to insert their lived experiences and perspectives into the process of knowledge construction (Fals Borda, 1987). Specifically, PAR allows for the democratization of knowledge production by engaging multiple constituents. Through this PAR process, problem definitions shift, thus posing meaningful implications for community-based interventions and social action that focuses on addressing community members' needs. Indeed, some argue that PAR is an epistemology that is intimately connected to empowerment and social change (Fals Borda, 1987).

A paradigm that many PAR practitioners are embedded in is critical theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critical theory considers knowledge as a constructed resource within social, historic, political, and economic structures. PAR, like critical theory, emphasizes engaging social justice and drawing from the skills and knowledge of multiple stakeholder groups to create structural change. Within this paradigm, social positioning is important because people who are situated differently in society based on their race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, and so on have access to different types of knowledge.

The argument is that when people from different social positions work together, better science, interventions, and social actions are possible (Fine & Torre, 2006). Moreover, empowerment is engaged when subordinated groups can name their realities, or social condition, and determine which interventions are appropriate for their communities. Indeed, empowerment occurs when people have control over the resources that affect their lives; being in control over problem definition and interventions is an important resource (Rappaport, 1995).

There are many methods used within a PAR framework. Among these are photovoice and focus groups (Foster Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1994). We focus on photovoice and house meetings—which are similar to, yet different from, focus groups. We used these methods for a year-long PAR project called Viva Live Oak! in an unincorporated area along the Central Coast of California.

We begin our chapter by discussing the two methods within the PAR process, specifically, how photovoice and house meetings work as tools toward social action and empowerment. We highlight some of the relevant literature where these tools have been used. For each method we discuss the steps involved in the process, as well as the benefits and challenges of each. Next, we provide reflections from two of our participant-researchers, who are also coauthors. We end the chapter with implications for community-based PAR and consider how photovoice and house meetings work as tools toward critical consciousness, empowerment, and social action.

PHOTOVOICE AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL ACTION AND EMPOWERMENT

Photovoice involves participants taking pictures based on a prompt and then using a structured format to discuss photographs within the group. The goal is to involve community members in the study of their community and to move toward social action. Photovoice was developed as a feminist methodology (Wang & Burris, 1994). It was initially used in a rural community-based project that documented Yunnan Chinese women's health and work-related experiences (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996). Since its development, photovoice has been used in public health, psychology, education, and other social and applied sciences to highlight people's lived experiences via visual images and aesthetic representations.

Photovoice has been employed with varied populations for many purposes. Indeed, young people of color (e.g., Foster Fishman et al., 2005), immigrants (Rhodes et al., 2009; Stevens, 2010), Latinas (Mejia et al., 2013), and many others have used photovoice to investigate social inequalities and work toward social change. Uses have included needs assessments, asset mapping, and program evaluation (Wang, 1999), as well as community organizing (Wilson et al., 2007). The use and application of photovoice as a tool for research and action are varied, yet predominantly centered on engaging community members in the collection and analysis of data.

Although photovoice is utilized more broadly now, some characteristics of feminist methodologies and critical theory remain embedded in many photovoice projects. These include considering participants as collaborators and moving toward social action through the development of critical consciousness. Participants are collaborators because they control which pictures they take and share with the group. This allows them to highlight experiences that they choose, and it also provides them with the control to share based on their level of comfort. Moreover, critical consciousness is further developed when participants reflect critically on their lives and on how their experiences relate to others, including how structures shape subjectivity and everyday experiences (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Freire, 1970/1988).

Photovoice facilitates increased critical consciousness, empowerment, and social action through a process whereby participants are deeply examining their experiences in community with others who might share or differ in such experiences. The process of sharing and reflecting creates a space to have critical dialogues regarding how problems are defined. The images taken by participants and the stories they tell about them allow for the reassessment of what counts as problems. This is essential because subordinated communities often do not control the dominant hegemonic narratives about them, much less how problems that affect them are conceptualized. This is problematic because when powerful dominant groups define problems, they are typically defined in ways that blame subordinated communities for those problems (Rappaport, 1995).

Photovoice allows people to use photography as a tool to tell their own stories. This careful examination of reality opens up a decolonial space that allows people to systematically confront "the Social Lie," or stories authored by dominant groups that blame subordinated groups for their condition(s) (Martín-Baró, 1994). Furthermore, photovoice encourages participants to use art, in the form of images, to tell stories, or alternative narratives, that are grounded in their everyday lives. The method, therefore, provides a way for participants to take control of an important psychological resource—stories about them—and use those alternative narratives to shape civic life and discourses that (dis)empower them (Rappaport, 1995).

In addition to providing people from subordinated groups with resources such as cameras, photovoice has other foundational components that facilitate deeper critical consciousness, empowerment, and social action. Specifically, the method includes structured conversations designed to move dialogue from individual experiences to collective struggles to structural issues (Wang & Burris, 1994). In this way, photovoice facilitates social action by linking people's stories to broader structural issues embedded in systems of power (Jurkowski, Rivera, & Hammel, 2009).

Because photovoice involves visual and narrative representations to convey a message or highlight an issue, it is an appealing strategy to influence and engage with others. Policymakers, for instance, are often invited to photovoice exhibitions as a way for participants to influence policy (Wang, 1999). Indeed, the expression "a picture is worth a thousand words" is warranted when policymakers and

power holders begin to think about issues represented in photovoice.

Photovoice Steps

The level of community collaboration in the setting of the problem definition can shape the steps involved in the photovoice process (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). In some cases, outside researchers have already set a problem definition. Although predetermining a problem might not be ideal for a fully collaborative process, it can sometimes be advantageous to have a problem already set. For example, when a problem has been set, those who have decision-making authority (e.g., elected officials, physicians) can be asked to serve on a photovoice board, with the intent of addressing the issue and supporting photovoice participants/community members. In this situation, after viewing photovoice results, the board could implement recommendations made by the participants, thus creating desired outcomes for community members (Wang, 1999).

On the other hand, when a problem definition is not set, participants can identify it. In this situation, various perspectives are taken into account in determining a problem, and collaboration among various community members can happen in a context where power is more equally shared. For example, in one photovoice project with African American teens in Baltimore, Maryland, youth decided to study love. This was surprising to many outsiders, who thought youth would study teen pregnancy, school dropout rates, or other topics deemed salient by power holders, including decision makers and academics (Downing, Sonestein, & Davis, n.d.).

Once a group has been established, the first photovoice session consists of introducing the project, as well as the PAR approach. Other topics that should be covered include the methodology, potential benefits and risks to participants, and confidentiality, as well as specific technicalities such as how to use the camera and take pictures safely, the ethics of taking pictures, and framing an image or scene to get the desired effect. A discussion on the ethics of photography is essential, including such issues as approaching people to take their picture(s), taking pictures of people without their knowledge, and determining when people should not be photographed. Related to this is being transparent about what might become of the pictures and whether these might be used for public display or research (Wang, 1999).

A prompt used for taking pictures (e.g., "What makes up your neighborhood? What do you like about it? What would you like to change?") can be determined or shared after establishing the purpose of the project and orienting participants, who will act as co-researchers. After a prompt is determined or agreed to, participants are then encouraged to take pictures and turn them in for development.

In subsequent photovoice sessions, participants discuss their photographs. They select one or two photos to share. The group discussion is then structured to follow the SHOWED method (Wang, 1999), which consists of the following questions: "What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist? How could this photo be used to Educate policymakers? What can we Do about it?"

After several iterations of taking photographs and discussing these during photovoice sessions, participants are instructed on how to categorize photographs and narratives according to themes they have discerned from their pictures and conversations. Participants then plan activities, which are typically photo exhibitions. They select and agree upon several photos they would like to display in an exhibition or at a community event.

Some possibilities for photography exhibitions include slide shows, simple frames on walls, storytelling, and/or written narratives to accompany photos. Stakeholders and the public are then invited to the exhibition. The exhibition, in addition to providing participants with an opportunity to share their work, serves as an action or an opportunity to engage power holders and the broader community in a dialogue about issues depicted in their images. Although exhibitions are a common action, other actions, such as guerilla art or skits that dramatize themes, may be appropriate for community intervention and social change.

Benefits and Challenges of Photovoice

In the process of conducting photovoice, several benefits can arise for individuals and groups. Among these are facilitating the development of relationships across lines of difference by sharing photographs and stories that focus not only on individual experiences but also on representing a broader narrative that encompasses multiple

perspectives. Through the use of photographs, photovoice can help generate dialogue and communication with others who might have differences in social status (e.g., race, class, gender, age, legal status), and in this way work toward building community (Carlson et al., 2006). Based on our experience, photovoice can create a venue for outsiders or newcomers to be integrated into their community. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for individuals to venture out of their comfort zone and engage their curiosities in a collective collaborative project. In all these ways, photovoice can facilitate the development and/or deepening of community bonds.

Generating conditions conducive to supporting participants' active community engagement is another benefit of photovoice. Through this process, community members can develop a collective imagination of possible social change. Photovoice therefore works as a tool toward catalyzing people into taking action(s) and creating social change because it provides them with an opportunity to inspect a condition, via a photograph, that might otherwise go unexamined.

Additionally, the use of photographs to initiate dialogue enables people to talk about topics or issues that might be difficult to discuss (Lykes, 2006). The depersonalization that often happens in the process of sharing a photograph allows an individual to share an experience in a way that feels safe because the person might choose to share it as a first- or third-person account. Such forms of photovoice have been used with people who have experienced racism, for example (Rhodes et al., 2009). Photovoice therefore presents several benefits that reinforce critical consciousness, empowerment, and social action.

Although photovoice is a powerful tool for engaging multiple stakeholders, the method presents several challenges. Among these is the level of commitment needed for the project, or the time the method requires. For example, participants are expected to take photographs and spend a significant amount of time reflecting on and discussing their photographs. Given that photovoice projects are often conducted with subordinated communities that might be struggling to make ends meet while juggling multiple jobs or responsibilities, participating in photovoice can be prohibitive or too demanding on their time. Yet this time is important because several photovoice studies have shown that critical consciousness-raising and empowerment processes require time; hence, any attempt at speeding up the process would be compromising to the goals of photovoice (Carlson et al., 2006; Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Another challenge to conducting photovoice is the limited financial support to fund such projects. Researchers might compensate participants for their time by providing a small stipend, as well as a meal and child care during photovoice sessions. Researchers often struggle to find the financial support to provide participants with the necessary resources to help them engage in the research (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011). Related to this are the typically limited forms of institutional support and/or resources available to researchers who engage with paradigms such as critical theory and epistemologies such as participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 1987).

Similar to the ways in which researchers are often constrained by funders, or the lack of funding, the research process—despite all good intentions to be collaborative and transparent—might be abstruse to participants. That is, participants might not feel comfortable with the approach taken toward conducting research in their communities. These dynamics are further exacerbated by interpersonal group dynamics where different identities and social positionalities are made salient and, in some cases, threatened by other social identities (Cornwall, 2004).

Some group dynamics that might challenge the research process are language barriers and power hierarchies within the group (Cornwall, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1994). These challenges create difficulties when working toward more equal collaborations and building community. For example, some photovoice projects that include immigrants from diverse language-speaking communities might require additional forms of support to ensure that all voices are heard and that some are not privileged over others (Stevens, 2010). Yet adding support in the way of translation might generate other barriers, such as disrupting the flow of the conversations or limiting the possibility for in-depth discussions. Group dynamics are pivotal because participants often discuss their experiences as embedded within their relationships to one another and to the research process. Therefore, how people interact becomes an important process toward helping participants build a safer space where they

can reflect and engage in dialogue (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

Creating a safer space can be a challenge for participants as well as researchers (Smith, 1999). In some cases, power dynamics can render some participants' experiences invisible, irrelevant, and insignificant because the more experienced people with academic credentials, such as researchers, might believe they know better (Smith, 1999; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). That is, researchers might think they know more about particular issues and/or participants' experiences, even when researchers and participants have had longstanding collaborations (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). On the other hand, it is also important that researchers not essentialize community members' experiences by assuming that all stories, beliefs, and so on are universally held within the community; researchers should be critical partners. Researchers must engage in their own process of reflection when engaging with community members in photovoice, and this might be a challenge for them as they move through the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Lykes, 2006).

Photovoice might also present additional sets of challenges for communities, specifically for those where photography is often reserved for people in positions of power (e.g., people working with organizations) or who are community outsiders (e.g., tourists). Some research suggests that in certain communities, photography might be viewed as intrusive and thereby generate tensions within the members' cultural communities (Lykes, 2006; Stevens, 2010). That is, within some community contexts, photography might be viewed as culturally inappropriate and invasive (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Relatedly, participants may not take photographs as a way to safeguard themselves against reprisal (Stevens, 2010).

Although there are challenges to photovoice, there are several steps that can build generative relations with community members prior to initiating photovoice. Among these are developing relationships with the community by participating in events and organizations and taking on roles that facilitate the researchers' visibility within the community. Thus, when engaged in photovoice, it is imperative that researchers build relationships of rapport, transparency, and accountability in order to develop appropriate and culturally relevant participatory methods (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). In doing

so, researchers must also take a strengths-based approach toward identifying not only community needs but also assets and how these can be leveraged toward facilitating deeper critical consciousness, social action, and empowerment.

HOUSE MEETINGS AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL ACTION AND EMPOWERMENT

The house meeting is a tool used in Industrial Area Foundation (IAF) organizing groups (Cortes, 2006). House meetings are group deliberative conversations, with 6 to 12 participants, that are designed to lead to action (Cortes, 2006). They can happen in homes, places of worship, schools, recreation centers, or any mediating institution. A house meeting creates a public space in which to have a dialogue about issues that matter to a specific community (Kong, 2010). The technique was developed mostly in California in the 1950s, when César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Fred Ross were organizing farm workers in the Salinas Valley. Ross, who was with the IAF, taught Chávez how to run house meetings, and, later, Huerta was trained (Shaw, 2008).

There are many goals for house meetings. One is to agitate leaders into action (Kong, 2010). Agitation means that people's imaginations and curiosities are piqued and that their self-interest is visible (Toton, 1993). Also, a house meeting should help participants build relationships and come out of isolation by telling stories about their lives (Auerbach, 2009; Kong, 2010). In this way, participants develop a common narrative that is based in their everyday realities (Cortes, 2006). Moreover, in the course of the house-meeting process, the facilitator looks for potential leaders whose skills can be further developed. Furthermore, the facilitator should consider the meeting as a way to build a constituency around an issue through reflection and as a venue to mobilize for action (Kong, 2010). Finally, a house-meeting campaign can be used within a setting to initiate institutional culture shift; for example, people may get to know one another in ways that are not typical based on roles people have within the setting, and this can create shifts in bonding, relationships, and trust, or a democratic culture (Cortes, 2006; Toton, 1993).

House meetings share some similarities with focus groups but are also distinct in important ways. Considering similarities, house meetings and focus groups employ the strategy of a

group conversation as a tool for understanding a phenomenon more deeply. With both methods, connections between participants are also encouraged, as is the telling of stories based on lived experience. Differences, however, include the intentions around organizing. With house meetings, an explicit goal is to agitate members to move toward action and to assess who might have an appetite to become a leader. Individual meetings are often set with potential leaders after the house meeting, in order to continue their engagement. Moreover, house meetings are frequently run with participants who know each other and are from the same institution.

House meetings have been deployed in different contexts with various issues. For example, they have been used in educational settings. Specifically, teachers ran house meetings in a Los Angeles school with parents; this created a shared bond and vision (Auerbach, 2009). Considering immigration as the main issue, house meetings were run in Sonoma County, California, for neighbors to discuss problems they were experiencing with the Sheriff's office regarding immigration raids, car impounds, and racial profiling (Kong, 2010). House meetings have also been used at the intersection of education and immigration. In one case, house meetings were a first step in developing a constituency to support funding for bilingual education in Texas (Cortes, 2006). House meetings were held with middle-class Whites and immigrants from Latina/o communities (both groups were members of congregations). What emerged from the sharing was a connection between both groups, a shift within this specific middle-class White community, and their movement to work toward supporting bilingual education (Cortes, 2006).

House meetings have also been utilized with people who were not part of the IAF or in IAF-member institutions. For example, after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, IAF leaders taught other community leaders how to run house meetings, and many were run with evacuees. These house meetings resulted in community leaders working with decision makers to accelerate the elderly getting more stable housing and the creation of a playground for children (Cortes, 2006).

As is clear, house meetings are a means for achieving the goals of social action and empowerment. As the earlier examples indicate, house meetings have been effective in that they have altered role relationships among people within the same institutions, and they have facilitated changes in local policies and procedures, while creating opportunities for open dialogue and interaction among various constituencies and power holders.

House-Meeting Process

Once trained, members of the community usually run house meetings (Auerbach, 2009; Kong, 2010). House-meeting leaders recruit people to participate who they think will be interested in the topic (Cortes, 2006). There are several steps to a house meeting (IAF training materials, n.d.). The meeting begins with orienting attendees, via a culturally appropriate reading, to the purpose. Introductions are next. The house-meeting leader then explains that the goal is to share stories around a topic in order to understand how participants are experiencing the topic. The leader explains that everyone should contribute. Next, the leader explicates that someone will keep time and take notes. Sometimes this person is predetermined, and sometimes the leader asks for a volunteer. The leader then poses the discussion question to the group. An example of such a question is, "How has the economic downturn affected you, or someone you are close to?" When there are about 10 minutes left, the leader asks the note taker to summarize what was heard and checks in with participants to see if the summary is correct. After all are satisfied with the summary, the leader describes possible next steps, asks for the group's evaluation of how the meeting went, and ends with reading a passage, a prayer, or whatever is culturally appropriate for the group.

During the sharing part of the meeting, the facilitator has several roles (IAF Training Materials, n.d.). The leader ensures that people tell stories (that is, not give opinions) and that all have a chance to share, and also scans the group for agitation, in order to identify people who feel passionate about an issue. The leader also steers the group away from possible solutions, which is a common impulse for many participants.

Benefits and Challenges of House Meetings

Like all methods, house meetings have benefits and challenges. The benefits can be organized into two groups related to facilitating empowerment (i.e., group consciousness and connections) and

facilitating social action. With respect to the former, house-meeting participants often learn that they are not alone. They come out of isolation and build bridges across status differences. For example, in house meetings with immigrant Latina/o parents and White teachers, almost everyone started crying when discussing why education was important to them (Auerbach, 2009). These connections across status differences can also enable groups in finding a common story or narrative that is grounded in lived experience rather than in dominant narratives, or overlearned stories, about "others" that are often based on stereotypes and deficits. In these ways, house meetings bring communities together, frequently despite little institutional support or few resources. Indeed, house meetings strive for inclusiveness. For example, the house meetings in which we participate and which we have run usually have real-time translation (i.e., everyone wears an earpiece and listens for simultaneous translation, as needed). This facilitates all people's participation. Because people rethink the meaning of their experiences and connect to one another in the development of a shared narrative, we label this as a form of empowerment. Indeed, people are taking control of some psychological resources, such as narratives, that affect their lives.

The house meeting structure also facilitates social action. For example, people take ownership over the process. Specifically, meetings are not led by outsiders (e.g., researchers or practitioners who are not members of the community), but by insiders who are passionate about and committed to the issues. Through the process, they identify leaders, who are then taught to lead house meetings. Subsequently, house meetings promote the development of leadership skills by all those who participate. Therefore, the house meeting structure is one that "gives away" knowledge production and democratizes knowledge through the practicing of local politics. Moreover, house meetings are expected to develop an agenda from the grassroots, as people talk about their experiences. The topics that arise from house meetings can drive what a group will do within its next organizing cycle; house meetings are structured to facilitate social action.

Although there are many benefits of house meetings, there are also challenges. Some challenges are related to logistics, some to the

organizer, and some to participants. Considering logistics, it can be difficult to find a location to hold meetings if the community has little public infrastructure or intuitional spaces. This is often the case in unincorporated communities, or areas that have no municipal government. It can also be challenging to find a time that works for many people, especially when trying to bring together a heterogeneous group. With respect to the organizer, sometimes that person can push an agenda that is not shared by the participants; this can result in some stories being minimized and others given more attention. Finally, perhaps because the house-meeting organizer often has a relationship with the participants, it can sometimes be challenging to keep participants from digressing from the topic. Additionally, when participants know one another, sometimes existing group dynamics enter the space and some people speak much more than others. Finally, participants can become disengaged if they are not used to or comfortable with an organizing framework.

CASE STUDY
Viva Live Oak!

The director of the Live Oak Family Resource Center and the first author met to discuss a possible collaboration. The director was engaged in place-based community organizing (i.e., organizing people who live in Live Oak) and was frustrated that so few residents identified with Live Oak, which is an unincorporated area between Santa Cruz and Capitola. It was difficult to organize Live Oak residents when they did not identify with their community. Through discussions, the two agreed on a partnership whereby the first author and her team would begin a photovoice study to understand better how residents thought about their neighborhoods. The project was supposed to last for 7 weeks, but it continued for about a year, based on the desires of the participants. Community-based researchers learned about ethics, took photos for 5 weeks, analyzed data for 2 weeks, and then gradually took over the project. They mounted several exhibitions and ran house meetings. Their goal was to raise awareness and initiate community conversations around their photovoice themes (i.e., social justice, community pride, and historical and ecological preservation).

Denise's Experience
Photovoice

Before I joined the photovoice project, I was interested in my neighbors in a much different way. Although I have a job that requires me to speak regularly and sometimes personally with the general public, I do not think of my neighbors as acquaintances, let alone "friends." Yet I care very intentionally about humans and people with whom I am in relationship. Once my husband convinced me that it was worth my while since they gave us dinner and $20.00 instead of dinner for $20.00, I thought "what a deal" and tagged along willing.

The personal stories became my motivating factor. Our prompt was, "What makes up your neighborhood? What do you like about it? What would you like to change?" After attending a few meetings, I was drawn in to the stories and others' pictures. I opened my eyes to what others were seeing in my neighborhood. When walking or driving, I began to notice areas or places where others had taken pictures and would reflect on both the photographer and the story they shared. Sometimes I could not see the point of interest in a particular photo at first but would later grow a deeper appreciation as the group continued to share more of their personal stories.

As the group continued, I met people with whom I would not normally socialize and became engaged with them. I felt a sense of belonging and care. My care grew to include their families and eventually expanded to the neighborhood rather than the people with whom I live.

I realized that being involved in photovoice gave a clearer understanding of my neighbors' struggles and joys by means of a universal language similar to music and other art forms. I did not always feel commonality, but I did broaden my awareness of what others were experiencing. I decided I wanted to become more directly committed to what was happening in my community.

I did not feel uncomfortable, but I recognize that the organizers may have felt challenged by various issues. What comes to mind most specifically is the desire to involve a more diverse group of participants, although that creates additional challenges. I believe the experience could have been greater if more people had participated originally; however, as a group, we decided to strengthen our "voice." I think we moved from a self-serving group to an action committee.

Photovoice Exhibitions

Once the group was established, we spread our wings. We gave ourselves a name, Viva Live Oak! and expanded our audience by having some photos enlarged and matted, with our narratives. We grouped our photos into three categories that we determined: environmental and historical preservation, social justice, and community pride. The photos were then displayed throughout the community, including the library, the county building, the farmer's market, and coffee shops. We also made a free calendar that we distributed. Our farmer's market display included us talking with passersby, which stimulated interest with more of our unknown neighbors . . . and then we knew them, or at least had made a point to meet them. It was exciting, and I was grateful to have ventured out from my own place of comfort.

With time and encouragement, we developed ownership of the agenda, the group's direction, and what we wanted to accomplish. Our project was supposed to last seven weeks, but we decided to keep meeting for almost a year to achieve our goals. As we moved into action, we needed organizing tools. This provided us the opportunity to learn about house meetings.

House Meetings

We chose to utilize house meetings because they were already in use in our area, and Jorge had a lot of experience with them. He trained us to lead them. Our first house meeting was at a laundromat. We gave people quarters to wash and dry their laundry in exchange for their participation in a conversation about how they felt living in our neighborhood. We showed our pictures and discussed photovoice. We engaged several Spanish speakers and, fortunately, many from our group spoke Spanish. We used a device and provided real-time translation, so the lines of communication were open on several levels. I was grateful our group had bilingual speakers, so I was able to understand stories of all the participants, not just the English speakers. That was a subtle but pivotal moment in my life.

Actions Facilitated by Viva Live Oak!

At the time, our church was sponsoring a Spanish-speaking congregation. I became involved in the development of the Hispanic ministry. Although I spoke little Spanish, I attended meetings and worship services with Spanish speakers.

I strongly advocated for real-time translation equipment and translators to be provided whenever possible. Connecting with others on a more level playing field has always been important to me, but based on skills that I learned from attending house meetings, I found a way to verbalize better what I thought and felt. I found the importance of being able to share the stories of our lives.

Jorge's Experience

My brother and I joined the PAR project because it was a way to share our stories with the greater community. The middle school provided a welcoming place for the initial meeting, where the researchers explained the project. Sitting in a sunlit room under oak trees, we were provided with cameras and guidance. The thing that appealed most to me was the collective freedom a diverse group of people was provided to own the PAR project and the ability to meet neighbors with whom I would normally not associate.

My brother and I decided to take pictures of the neighborhood in which we grew up. Hidden and running parallel along the railroad was Kingsley Street, a cluster of single-family homes neighboring dilapidated apartment complexes. We saw kids playing a fierce soccer game in the alley where he and I once played. Circling around the apartment complex, I took a picture of a broken window, which seemed to be fixed with plastic due to the negligence of the property manager. This experience would later shape my civic engagement in the community. My brother and I were talking about our childhood and the lack of activities for kids of the working poor. We decided to organize a free Indoor Soccer Program for kids but did not know how. We did not want kids to be victims of gangs, drugs, and other negative influences readily available.

We all had different lives but connected in the middle school, and then the back room of the Live Oak Family Resource Center under the oak trees. Viva Live Oak!: Life between the S and the C was the name we gave the project (Live Oak is between Santa Cruz [the "S"] and Capitola [the "C"]). We printed our pictures with narratives in English and Spanish, alternating which language came first throughout the pictures. We did this to be inclusive of the growing Latina/o population. We set up displays and held house meetings in an effort to connect with the community and hear their stories of Live Oak.

I was trained by the IAF on how to conduct house meetings and have led many after participating in them. This grassroots organizing method was shared with and implemented within the Viva Live Oak! group at laundromats. With simultaneous translation, we were able to break down communication barriers and connect further with one another. At the end we identified two potential leaders, who experienced agitation after speaking of fear for their teenagers. We offered them an opportunity to participate in the Live Oak Family Resource Center's civic engagement component. The Live Oak Family Resource Center is involved in COPA (Communities Organized for relational Power and Action), a nonpartisan, broad-based organization affiliated with the IAF.

We continued having house meetings through the Live Oak Family Resource Center and connected with other community members and religious institutions. Members like Denise and others would later organize house meetings within their institution. These new relationships would later help carry out a Free Indoor Soccer Program (futsal), which led to a regional gang prevention strategy. Hundreds of house meetings were carried out by institutions, with a focus on community safety. Through the house meeting campaign, we heard stories of the need for free and enriching activities for minors but also a need for parent resources and relationships with law enforcement. We organized a nonpartisan Shared Prosperity Campaign, which contained this gang prevention strategy. COPA and the Catholic Diocese adopted this strategy, which led to the building of a Boys' & Girls' Club my brother and I always wanted in our neighborhood.

Follow-up

For Viva Live Oak!, the combination of photovoice and house meeting was effective in helping participants think about and reflect upon their lives more deeply, and take action both within the group and in other areas of their lives. Furthermore, the projects they began are still going strong. For example, futsal has completed five seasons and continues to be free for the children in the league. Because the futsal league has been so successful, free baseball and basketball leagues have also begun, with more than 500 children participating. Thus, because participants organized within their community to create resources that the community desired, we label this PAR project a success.

CONCLUSION

Photovoice and house meetings can be powerful tools for data collection, deep discussions, critical consciousness raising, empowerment, and social action. These tools can be easily used across settings, with various populations, and for different reasons. Furthermore, they have the potential to bring communities together in ways that few other methodologies can. For these reasons, we strongly recommend their consideration in participant-focused, community-based interventions.

AUTHOR NOTE

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