Looking through the Lens of Urban Teenagers: Reflections on Participatory Photography in an Alternative High School

Jill M. Chonody, Travis Martin, & Jill Amitrani Welsh

Abstract: Earlier in this decade, two graduate students and one faculty member in social work facilitated a participatory photography project at an alternative high school. Our project sought to garner the unique viewpoint of urban youth on assets and issues in the community. We met with a group of adolescents twice a week over the course of 10 weeks to go on community photoshoots and conduct photodiscussions. This article aims to provide a critical reflection of our experience with this project. We have incorporated some additional information about the implementation of our project alongside our reflection. The relevance of our social work training and its influence on our perspectives are discussed.

Keywords: urban blight; teenagers; groupwork; group dynamics; high-school project; community-based participation; graffiti; murals; participatory photography; systems theory; strengths-based approach; transference; countertransference; resilience; photovoice

Introduction

We are sitting outside the building waiting to go inside. We have arrived too early, and we are nervous. We have been preparing for this day. We combed through the literature, making extensive notes. We met for hours planning our curriculum for the project, and the digital cameras have been purchased. We are still nervous. Will the teens think this project is pointless or boring? Do we know what we are doing? Will we fail? It was time to go. We mustered up our courage and went inside the building.

During the spring term of 2010, a team of university faculty, students, and staff designed and implemented a participatory photography project at an alternative high school. The three social work team members, who had primary responsibility for the content of the project, aim to provide a descriptive critical reflection of their experience. We have structured this reflection according to each of the contributing writers as a way to present the components of the project along with individual reflective pieces. While each section has a primary author, we have all contributed to the final product.

Project Overview

Our project was based at an urban high school in the northeastern United States whose mission is to facilitate academic achievement through project-based learning. This school engages youth who have had varying degrees of success in a traditional school structure and provides an alternative route for earning a high school diploma. Two social work graduate students (now MSW's) with knowledge and interest in this substantive area helped with project implementation as part of an independent study course. Travis attended introductory sessions and the photoshoots, and Jill W. led team-building activities and facilitated "photodiscussions." Jill C., a social work faculty member, oversaw the entire project. The goal of our project was to improve critical thinking and writing skills through the medium of photography, and the focus was on strengths and weaknesses in the community. We met with a small group of youth (aged 15-18) two times per week over the course of 10 weeks with each session lasting approximately two-and-a-half hours. One session took place at the high school to complete group photoshoots. The second session, which was held at the university, was a discussion of the images they created.

The nature of participatory photography seemed to be a good fit with the school's programmatic needs, and our project was based on the principles of photovoice, a methodology geared toward participant empowerment (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a research methodology, which often culminates in a public exhibition of the photographic work created by the participants. Our project was not research-based, thus we did not collect any data. However, we sought to create a

critical dialogue about community concerns and provide a way for participants to present their perspectives, which included a planned exhibit. We felt they could provide a unique perspective on answers to community issues that plague leaders, scholars, and members of the community: How do we strengthen our community when problems seem to engulf us?

An Exploration of the Photoshoots:
Jill C.'s Reflection

Our photoshoots occurred in the community where the high school is located, and each time we went out to take photographs, we chose a different route. I was very new to this city, having lived there less than a year, and this neighborhood was completely unfamiliar to me. As we explored the neighborhood and I got to know the students, they told me and showed me about the problems they and their community faced. As we talked more, I came to realize that this was not a place that many people visit; something that they in fact acknowledged. Yet these young people exhibited such resilience. The juxtaposition between their toughness and their vulnerability was striking. At times they seemed mature beyond their years, and at others, they were very typical teenagers. Despite the hardships they faced, they seemed to be hopeful. As an educator, I have often stressed how environment shapes development and the role of resilience in overcoming difficulties in that system. This experience further confirmed my thinking and allowed me to see that developmental struggle to achieve autonomy in a new context.

During the photoshoots, the youth appeared to have little difficulty capturing the problematic aspects of the community, but struggled to locate community strengths. Regardless of the focus, the images generated during the process were powerful. However, we did not specifically ask the participants' permission to include their work in any scholarly publications. Therefore, I, not the participants, took the photographs included in this article. Nonetheless, these images are representative of the content captured by the youth as I accompanied them on photoshoots. Taking pictures with them allowed me to feel more like a participant instead of a facilitator. I think this created trust and allowed me to become part of the group. I am not sure this would have occurred had I

not been along on these outings. Moreover, I was "framing" the community just as they were, and our perspectives often merged. I chose three photographs which reflect topics extensively explored in our photodiscussions – trash, abandoned buildings, and graffiti. These three components were not exceptions in the community that the youth chose to highlight; they were part of the norm. Yet for me, they were in stark contrast to my own experiences of community both as an adolescent and an adult, and as we photographed these realities, I was outraged by what community residents are expected to accept.

Trash was ever-present on our photoshoots, and it is both a reality and a stereotype about Philadelphia. The city has been dubbed filthadelphia (Urban Dictionary, 2010), which pretty accurately reflects the significant litter problem that can be found in various parts of the city. The pristine urban landscape of Center City stands in stark contrast to the debris found outside the downtown area, which really made me think more about the meaning of trash at a social structural level and the community narrative that emerges as a result of it. Image 1 depicts this problem by capturing the window of an abandoned building that has been stuffed with various cans and bottles. Although this display of trash is somewhat different than the routine reality of trash seen on a day-to-day basis, this unusual arrangement catches the eye. Gutters full of filth, streets lined with discarded papers, and sidewalks

strewn with cigarette butts often go largely unnoticed, but placing a camera in participants' hands can make even the mundane stand out from the background. As the number of photoshoots grew, I too found that I "saw" the trash less.

Even in such a short time, I became accustomed to all the various kinds of litter around me. Furthermore, my reaction to the trash was similar in some ways to that of the teens. Their perspective seemed to vacillate between apathy and outrage. So what if I litter when it is already dirty? Why is it so nasty here when other neighborhoods are clean? I could relate to this and found my own feelings waxing and waning along much the same continuum.

Abandoned buildings were also ubiquitous on our photoshoots and seemed to be an accepted aspect of the landscape for this group of youth who indicated that the discarded properties are havens for drug dealing, assaults, and squatters. While I have worked with clients from a wide-ranging set of circumstances and backgrounds, I had not experienced community problems in quite this way. Standing in front of these scary looking places made me wonder what might be lurking just inside. One's perspective significantly changes as one's car is exited and replaced by a walk in the neighborhood. The reality of burned out buildings and accumulated trash is felt in a new way, and I was changed by this experience. I could now begin to imagine what it must be like to have to live with these community problems as part of an everyday landscape. Interestingly, the youth still expressed a desire for change in the community even though these empty shells were the norm. To them, the buildings represented opportunities to create jobs, community centers, and outlets for recreation. This neighborhood offers little in terms of teenage socialization. Movie theaters, bowling alleys, and shops are conspicuously missing, so hanging out on

the corner is literally the only available activity for many young people. This forced me to think about privilege, my own as well as others, and the inequitableness of opportunity concentrated in geographic spaces. Thus these abandoned buildings are physical reminders of the plight that is occurring in this neighborhood. Image 2 illustrates how these sad behemoths loom largely in the community and exude their associated risk of both danger and untapped potential.

Finally, our photoshoots were never without an occurrence of graffiti and other forms of street art. Philadelphia boasts the greatest number of outdoor murals across the country (~ 5,000) and the largest public arts program solely focused on their creation (Mural Arts Tour, 2010). Like most places with graffiti, the spray-painted additions to alleys, underpasses, and abandoned buildings range from elaborate artwork to tags (graffiti artists' signature symbols). However, many of Philadelphia's neighborhoods also have these elaborate murals (for a virtual tour of these murals, see http://muralarts.org/explore/mural-explorer), including the one where our project took place. These murals are spectacular in scope and content and came to be one my favorite things about Philadelphia. Every corner we turned, we faced some form of graffiti, and the artistic expression was at times beautiful. I could appreciate the skill needed for their creation and thought a lot about how these brightly painted displays might be viewed as welcome additions to the community. At other times, the graffiti evoked a real sense of sadness. People who had been murdered were memorialized in spectacular displays of grief, and the knowledge that violence was a problem in the community was unavoidable. It was hard to wrap my head around what it might be like to be a part of a community where this might be

routine. Like the trash and the abandoned buildings, I wondered: are these memorials "unseen" over time? For this group of youth, both the murals as well as the street art were respected, but tags seemed to be viewed with both a lens of inevitability along with an acknowledgment of their perceived contribution to the degradation of the community. Large displays of graffiti are often not just one thing or another, as Image 3 provides a complex mix of elaborate artwork and a variety of tags.

The photoshoots were typically fun for the teens, but sometimes it was for reasons other than taking pictures. I had imagined that they would embrace this project since it was different from traditional curriculum, but what I did not fully consider was how the youth would view the actual tasks required for the project. It was schoolwork – brainstorming, writing, and thinking about the interrelationship of issues at the social level. As a result, I had to reconsider these assumptions and how they were influencing my perspective and expectations. Slowly, I was able to let this go and focus my efforts on what the teens wanted from the project. I did not always find this easy to do, but once I did, I found the experience even more rewarding.

As a facilitator, I enjoyed these photoshoots immensely as it allowed me the opportunity to get to know the youth, the city, and ultimately myself in a different way. I reflected back on my upbringing from a slightly different perspective and thought quite a lot about the lived experience for these teens. Accompanying them on the photoshoots also provided an additional dimension of understanding that would prove useful when I observed their photodiscussions a few days later. Because they

would choose which two pictures they wanted to include for group presentation and discussion, I was able to see what was most relevant to them from our outing. I had viewed the scene for myself, and now I got to see the way they framed and explained it and how they felt. Seeing both sides of the process illuminated the strengths of participatory photography as a creative endeavor and a medium for critical exploration.

Photodiscussions: Jill W.'s Reflection

To further explore the teens' photographs, the images were displayed and the group discussion was structured around a series of questions aimed at deconstructing the image. These questions, called SHOWeD, are: 1)What do you **S**ee here?; 2) What is really **H**appening here?; 3) How does this relate to **O**ur lives?; 4) **W**hy does this problem or strength exist? and 5) What can we **D**o about this (Wallerstein, 1987)? I facilitated these photodiscussions in order to foster further analysis of the strengths and issues in the community. I was eagerly anticipating my role, and the more I read about photovoice, the more I wanted to get started. My excitement continued to build throughout our preparation of the project, until the moment I stood up to begin the first photodiscussion – and then I became anxious. I suddenly started doubting my ability to connect with the teens, and I worried that they would feel uncomfortable with me. I studied group work in my Master's of Social Work program, yet I struggled to put what I knew into practice. I realized later that, through this struggle, I learned something about myself and my ability to work with groups.

During that first photodiscussion, I felt my anxiety grow with each picture. My approach did not seem to be working, and most of the youth were answering the questions very concretely. They were not making any connection to larger social issues or their experiences in the community. Yet, when I would attempt to get the group to go deeper, the conversation rarely offered any further insight into their thinking. With every one of their blank stares and yawns, I became increasingly doubtful of my ability to engage this group. Finally, I realized that I was not facilitating a conversation; rather, I was using the SHOWeD questions like a script. My mind raced as I frantically attempted to recall literature I had read about group work with

adolescents, photodiscussions, or anything that could bring life back to this session. Then, a teen that was known for his spontaneous shouting did just that. He yelled out a comment about what he thought was really happening in another teen's photograph, and the energy in the room changed. In that instant, my fears eased. I had unknowingly set my expectations for the natural flow of the discussion too low. I realized I was putting too much emphasis on my role in facilitating their discussion rather than recognizing their own interests and abilities. Slowly, other members of the group started vocalizing their opinions, first about his comment and then about the picture itself. Although the conversation was somewhat chaotic in its structure and form, the youth were engaged in a dialogue with one another. Their insights about the pictures started to build from their respective ideas.

During those first few minutes of give and take, I allowed myself to just observe and process what was happening around me, but not react. And what I realized was that I was not being authentic to my professional training, my experience, or myself. I focused too much on the questions that I was posing, and in the process, I missed their answers, their voices. I needed to utilize my knowledge about group dialogue to achieve the depth that seemed to happen organically as a result of that one student's comment. I was better able to implement the group facilitation skills I had learned through my graduate-level coursework in the succeeding sessions because of this realization. I continued to use the SHOWeD method to guide our discussion but now I posed those questions in a way that allowed for the teens to reflect on the photographs from their respective interests and cognitive abilities. I refrained from directly asking the participants the reasons why they thought something; rather, I allowed for more time, often with everyone in silence, for them to think about their answers.

At first, the silence was somewhat uncomfortable for me. I worried the group members would perceive the silence as "free time" to talk or check their cell phones, but I forced myself to create the space for silence, sometimes slowly counting to 30 in my head before engaging the group again. Once I became more comfortable with this technique, I found the silence gave me time to reflect on what

was happening in the group. In the initial photodiscussion, I felt like the pace of the facilitation was getting away from me, but now, through the use of silence, I was more aware of the group dynamics and discussion flow. The silence was also helpful when the discussion required the teens to critically analyze the circumstances or symbolism of the image. I found that some of the youth would use this time to provide an initial answer and then respond after more thought with additional detail or insight.

Interestingly, when the image was not their own, the teens were much more willing to discuss the possible assets and social problems present in the picture. In fact, the most in-depth discussions typically occurred when the photographer was absent. The teens seemed to more freely analyze what the photographer may have intended to represent when no direct response from that person was possible. Despite my attempts to reassure the teens that there was no "right" answer when analyzing photographs, the presence of the photographer in the group changed the depth of the dialogue. At first, I thought their openness to talking about the photographs of an absent group member was rather strange, and then I remembered what it was like to be a teenager. All the pressures of being accepted, always having the right answer, and the constant worrying of being embarrassed may just be influencing how freely the group discussed the photograph in front of their peer photographer, and then it hit me: my feelings of nervousness and doubt about my ability to facilitate the photodiscussions were not that different than how the teenagers may have been feeling when asked to discuss their pictures in the group. I suddenly had a better understanding of our shared experience.

Although I will never know if these factors did in fact impact group discussion, I did become more sensitive to the social pressures this age group might be experiencing. I made a conscious effort to integrate what the teens were doing well in the discussions, thus actively applying a strengths-based approach to group work. My facilitation now included comments that highlighted the good qualities of the teens' photographs as well as their comments in discussions. I was now reinforcing their photography skills, the purpose of the project,

and the value of the teens' perspective. Moreover, utilizing a strength-based approach may have helped the students realize the potential in their own voice and promoted positive group dynamics.

Like most groups, the teens came to the project with already established social norms, and a few of the extroverted members of the group would sometimes tease the alienated members. This was the first time I had experienced this type of behavior in a group that I was leading, and I did not quite know how to respond. I could feel myself getting very upset – angry, actually. The teasing seemed foreign, yet very familiar to me. This type of relentless mockery was something I had not heard in several years; however, it only took a few moments for that rhythmic sound of the jokes and jabs to bring me right back to, well, high school. I found myself becoming distracted by my own emotions. If *I* had to take a photograph that would represent my work with this group, it would have been the moment when the teasing erupted. This image would remind me to always see the whole person in every group.

Watching the teasing gave me a greater appreciation for the complexity of their lives. The social problems depicted through our project only scratched the surface of what some of the teenagers regularly endured, whether as an aggressor or a victim of the teasing. Despite my distraction, I knew I needed to redirect the group away from these negative behaviors. I picked out a strength from the preceding comment and directed the group toward it. This technique allowed me to refocus my emotional response and maintain a professional boundary with the group. As a result, I could appreciate how a strengths-based approach can be beneficial for the facilitator as well as the group when responding to disruptive behaviors. I will take this experience with me, and my mental image of the teasing will influence my social work practice. Every time I recall that image, I discover something new about the interaction. On that day, the image represented the complexities of social acceptance, and now, through further reflection, I see those group members in the background who attempted to defend the students getting teased, a strength of the group I did not initially recognize. This mental image continues to be a point of reference for my group work and personal growth in social work practice.

Through my experience in these photodiscussions, I learned that creating depth in group discussions can be achieved when the facilitator is attentive to the strengths of the group and makes the proper adjustments so that all group members feel comfortable with their abilities. At the beginning of the project, I was trying too hard to move the group toward my expectations for a "good" discussion. Listening to the teens and observing their interactions helped me to change my approach to something that was more conducive to their established group dynamic. I found this to be especially important because this group came with a shared history. Once I started to become more authentic to my own strengths and training, I was better able to incorporate the values of photovoice into my facilitation instead of just the techniques. Moreover, the teens seemed willing to open up as the project progressed, and their group dynamics came to the forefront, which fluctuated according to the composition of youth for that particular session. Despite the teens' increased engagement in the project, the group's cohesion was often dependent on attendance, and as a result we were unable to achieve consistency across the sessions. Working on this project gave me a greater appreciation for how the strength-based perspective can move my attention from challenges in the project to the abilities of the group and its individual members. I also found that in working with teens, taking time to affirm their individual strengths can help foster their connection to the group, the project, and the value of their perspective.

Group Dynamics: Travis' Reflection

In my advanced practice course, we had been discussing group dynamics in the clinical setting, and now I was presented with an opportunity to apply some of this knowledge at the community level through my involvement with this project. Prior to its start, I had my own conceptualizations about the interactions and exchanges that occur between members of a group, and I held the naïve belief that an organism is an easy thing to build. What is a group, after all, if not a biological organism? My social work education has taught me to view life – indeed, the entirety of the universe – as an interconnected, ever-changing machine that encompasses the individual systems that make it up, and then uses these individual systems to drive the larger form. Coupling this with my personal belief

that human beings are basically good and will tend to behave altruistically, with the betterment of the human species always in mind, I saw a chance in this project to continue a subjective interrogation into the nature of group dynamics.

From my perspective, this project would be a sort of litmus test of my assumptions and beliefs about the way that people interact with one another. I began to think more about my own experience in groups and about our coursework at the time. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) write that the first group to which we belong is the family, and that the groundwork for all our future interactions in social situations is shaped by these previous experiences. Given how the past influences the present, issues of transference and countertransference have been in the forefront of my mind since the start of my work with clients. Sitting in groups, it is easy to drift, to fall back into memory, and the faces of clients become faces from the past. I reminded myself that it would be crucial to remain grounded in the present moment and to not use this group to work through my old psychic wounds. It was also important for me to view this project as distinct from my previous experiences with group work.

My primary participation occurred during the initial group meetings, and throughout those sessions I was paying particular attention to the interpersonal transactions among the group members. What struck me were the tenuous stabs at communication, the initial glances and stares that I felt upon me. At this early stage of the project, I wanted to foster trust and ensure the creation of a safe space where the teens could dialogue openly. Fundamental aspects of social work practice and education, such as active listening skills and use of empathy, would prove essential as the group learned how to work with each other and me. The initial sessions focused on the basics of photography, and I quietly observed these meetings. As noted above, the youth came to this project with pre-existing social norms, and I took note of the already-established alliances among the youth. During these sessions, I had a sense that I was an outsider or in some way not welcome. I do not believe that this is due to the way that the youth treated me, but rather, my own issues with groups, which I needed to attend to and monitor.

After several sessions, Jill C. asked me to facilitate a discussion on perceived community strengths, and I immediately felt anxious. I spent some time reflecting on the difference between this group discussion and a group therapy session. While the project did not preclude the exploration of emotions or trauma, it was not the express purpose. Whereas I was skilled in getting people to open up to me, I would also have to be careful to not turn this discussion into therapy. This group activity was to be a brainstorming exercise where the youth would identify strengths present in the community, and I was to record their answers on a large notepad. The purpose was to get the youth to think about the neighborhood in a critical fashion while simultaneously utilizing a strengths-based perspective to elicit positive observations about the community. Part of the reason I felt nervous at this meeting with the teens was the fact that I had no experience working with youth outside of an undergraduate internship five years prior. Nonetheless, I anticipated the prospect of challenging myself in the context of non-clinical group work.

At the beginning of the activity, the teens just stared at me while I stood at the front of the room with the big notepad. I tried to get them to say something, anything. Their gazes fixed firmly on me, I felt a sort of self-consciousness, wondering what I looked like to them. Keeping my attention on the exercise gave me something outside of myself on which I could focus. What was important was the formulation of the group through their interaction. I had approached the exercise as information seeking, in that it would reveal insights into the youth's understanding of their community. I used open-ended questions, made jokes, and tried to facilitate trust by conveying warmth, respect, and interest. I also focused on their body language and other non-verbal cues. The youth seemed to respond to my methods, and slowly they began to open up. They were engaged and interested, but after 10 minutes of discussion, one teen asked me to rephrase a question, and I panicked, taken aback. Why had he not understood the question? Was I being too obtuse? Did I need to alter my word choice? Remaining grounded in the present moment is not always easy for me, but mindfulness techniques have made me aware of the value of perceiving the immediate environment with all five senses. I refocused and tried to consider more carefully what

it was I was actually trying to ask. Finally, I was able to revise my statement to the student's understanding, and the discussion continued. The list grew, and I was impressed with the students who seemed willing to look at the positive aspects of spaces that might be seen as largely negative. The conversation did veer at times towards the negative, but through the use of reframing technique, I was able to redirect the activity while also validating the negative aspects of the community that the youth described. I considered my rephrasing of the question and the teens' reframing of their environments, and I recognized that the group is a potentially transformative environment, a place to learn new patterns of interaction with others.

I assumed that the group would come together quickly, that they would fall instantly into patterns of considerate listening and feedback. The reality is that the teens were making steady progress, and, as the literature suggests, team-building exercises were essential at the earliest stages of group formation. The creation of an environment where honest communication could take place is a challenging aspect of group work, yet this is an aspect of practice that has been derived directly from my formal training as a social worker. By maintaining a strengths-based approach where the socially interactive process was equally as important as the end product, any information, which was generated from my exercise, could be viewed as valuable to the project. The teens were able to critically consider their communities and focus upon positive elements of these spaces. At the same time, they grew more comfortable with each other and with our team. Harmony is not easy to attain, and healthy group dynamics do not form instantaneously. I was forced to remain flexible in my selection of methods, and this served as a reminder of the need to remain malleable in the design and implementation of the project.

As the exercise was concluding, I wrote the final item on the list of community strengths. I was thinking about my role in this project. It felt like I had not done all that much tangible work during the exercise, but perhaps this was due to my use of skills internalized throughout my social work education, such as use of empathy, active listening skills, and maintaining a strengths-based perspective. This group experience also allowed me

the opportunity to interact with a totally unique group, wholly different from my encounters within other group contexts. I felt that my education had encouraged me to be fluid in my thinking, to adopt and appreciate a wide variety of ideas and experiences.

I felt more confident in my own abilities to facilitate group discussions with culturally diverse groups afterwards, and also had a sense that the values and experiences of the youth involved were not all that much different from my own. We shared many central concerns. My work on this project was distinct from my family upbringing, my education, and my employment as a group therapist, and it was important for me to draw clear boundaries throughout the process, to remain grounded in the present moment, and to actively listen and pay attention to what the teens were presenting to me. Moreover, through my work on this project, I reexamined many of my existing notions about group work, as well as my practice as a social worker. In educational terms, I feel that this project corroborated much of what I had learned and observed already in my Master's program; namely, that the subjective experience is valid and valuable, and that humans seem to want to cooperate and communicate. I was able to participate in new experiences, facilitating groups with a population that I had previously never served. At the same time, our team as a whole learned some valuable lessons about implementing a participatory photography project at the community level.

Discussion

In reflecting on the project as a whole, we felt that our social work training assisted us in a number of ways. First, a strengths-based perspective enabled us to respond to some of the unique challenges we faced during this project. For example, we approached the teens' inconsistent attendance from a perspective that allowed us to acknowledge the participation of those that were in attendance, while recognizing the complexity of the teens' lives. Of course, we were disappointed when attendance was low; however, if we were to value the experience of the teens' lives in our project, we had to also understand that these same situations, stresses, and responsibilities could prevent them from attending individual sessions. We did not anticipate this variability in attendance, but our adaptation to it was

just one of the ways we learned the importance of altering our expectations when implementing a community-based participatory approach with teens. We learned to hold less steadfastly to our agendas and allow the process to unfold naturally.

Second, our educational background and training in social work taught us to begin "where the client is," which in this case was the group as a whole. Despite this, we began the project with a set of clear assumptions and expectations for the group. But we quickly realized that we needed to adjust the project to meet the interests and needs of the group, and drew the conclusion that what we wanted was not necessarily relevant. When something is not working with or for a group, everyone knows it. Whether it was a facilitation style, the time allotted for an exercise, or the teen's individual expectations, we tried to tweak our approach to meet them where they were. Adaptation is not always easy, and each of our skills in flexibility was pushed. This lesson learned served us well throughout the duration of the project. Even as we were preparing for the conclusion of the project, changes had to be made. A public exhibition of the teens' photographs would not be possible, and in the end, they utilized their photographs as part of their capstone projects. Although we had hoped for a public exhibition, integrating the images into a project that was solely their own was another example of how we could work within the already established structure and norms of the group.

Finally, systems theory framed our understanding of the youth's multifaceted and often difficult backgrounds. Systemic thinking can provide insight into the vast network of social interactions that each of us is engaged in every day, and this helped us to remain empathetic to the individual circumstances of each teen's situation. It is not possible to be cognizant of these issues all the time, but we relied on our personal reflections to analyze our reactions and guide our interactions. In addition, our facilitation team met regularly to provide feedback to each other and make any necessary changes to the session content and structure. These meetings were collectively helpful, especially the reflective discussions about our roles and facilitation. As graduate students, the photovoice project was an invaluable experiential learning opportunity for Jill W. and Travis. The facilitation team discussions

provided an opportunity to recognize the importance of cultural competency and self-awareness when working with a group. These are skills that will be readily adaptable to other situations that we face in our future professional encounters.

This project represented a number of firsts, but for all of us, it was our first attempt at using participatory photography, and the experience affected each of us in slightly different ways. For Jill C., the work with her graduate students solidified her belief in the power of experiential learning, a benefit of which she has also gained. The collaborative and close relationship was not anticipated, but was fully appreciated. Her experience with this group of youth was both challenging and rewarding, which reminded her that adversity can create excellent opportunities for personal and professional growth. This experience helped Jill W. gain a greater appreciation for self-awareness in facilitating discussions. She is more aware of the emotional reaction she may have if members of a group are being teased. Despite the knowledge she gained through literature review and social work curriculum, it was in her struggle to effectively respond to the different situations within the group that she learned the most about group work. Furthermore, systems theory and a strengths-based approach provided a foundation for recognizing the culture of the school, its neighborhood, and the group, and through this, she gained a new appreciation for the use of theory in social work practice. For Travis, the project was particularly important because it provided him his first opportunity to work with a non-clinical group. The acquisition of new skills and the redefining of old ones was a necessary part of this process, and, as every new social exchange offers the opportunity for re-learning old programmed patterns of group interaction, the largely positive discussions that he facilitated helped to re-shape his thinking about group dynamics. In sum, the collaborative nature of our team created space for the personal and professional growth of our team members, and we hope the same can be said for the participants.

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About the Authors: Jill M. Chonody, Ph.D. is
Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Indiana
University Northwest (219-981-5631;
jchonody@iupui.edu). Travis Martin, LCSW is
Coordinator of Co-Occurring Services/Counselor
CODAC Behavioral Healthcare, Inc., Providence,
RI (401-942-1450; tmartin@codacinc.org). Jill
Amitrani Welsh, M.S.W. is Assistant Director, Faith-
Justice Institute at Saint Joseph's University (610-
660-1765; jamitran@sju.edu).