

Photovoice, COVID-19, and the Possibility of Post-Traumatic Growth

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Abstract: We describe the implementation of a photovoice exhibition on safe coping during the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We explore how the photovoice exhibition took on new meaning in the context of the large-scale disruption caused by the pandemic. The exhibition featured photographs about the experience of safety and safe coping among participants with co-occurring traumatic stress and substance use. We discuss our process for planning an exhibition during the pandemic and for applying study findings to the broader community during the crisis.

Keywords: photovoice, COVID-19, hermeneutics, community-based participatory research

The picture contains an indissoluble connection with its world.
(Gadamer, 1960/2004, p.138)

Photovoice is a qualitative, community-based participatory research method that has been used to document life narratives, raise critical consciousness, and facilitate community change (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is congruent with an intellectual tradition that believes art “threatens the given form of existence” (Marcuse, 2007, p. 222). In this photovoice project, participants were asked to take photos of their daily lives in response to prompts using a borrowed camera. Often in photovoice research, photographs are discussed either with researchers or collectively with other participants in focus groups. Development of critical consciousness may be facilitated in participants through discussion of the photographic representations of participants’ day-to-day experiences (Freire, 1968/2000). An assumption is that photovoice, by generating critical consciousness, may act as a catalyst for transforming social relationships. Although photovoice has been an established method of inquiry for a few decades, it has more recently been used with persons experiencing mental illness and found to be an acceptable and feasible method of inquiry (Han & Oliffe, 2016).

In August 2019, our research team undertook a photovoice study to understand the experience of coping safely with symptoms of traumatic stress and substance use (Dell et al., 2021). Saint Louis University’s institutional review board approved all study procedures prior to data collection. Working with counselors at a community mental health center, Places for People, we recruited six mental health service recipients from the Seeking Safety program. Seeking Safety is a psychosocial intervention that promotes the use of skills to cope with co-occurring traumatic stress and substance use. The intervention may be delivered either individually or in groups (Najavits et al., 1998). Inspired by the creative and community-based aesthetics of photovoice, we believed that photovoice would allow participants to explore the phenomenon of safety more creatively than traditional interviews or focus groups. We also appreciated that photovoice would allow for more non-verbal ways to express insight into safe coping. We wanted participants’ focus group-based discussion about their photos and themes to reinforce the insights and skills people developed through the group and to share what is needed to facilitate

safety within the broader community.

The research team was comprised of three social workers, one of whom is a doctoral student at Saint Louis University and the director of research and evaluation at the community mental health center where the study took place, another who is a therapist and coordinates a community arts program at the study site, and a third who is an associate professor at Saint Louis University. In our study, each participant shared their time, knowledge, and insight to make the project possible by taking photographs, meeting individually with a researcher to discuss the meanings of their photographs, and meeting in focus groups with other participants to provide critical feedback on author-generated themes.

The project was to culminate in a gallery-based exhibition of the participants' photographs. Entitled *Standing in the Balance*, the exhibition was designed as an installation featuring participants' photographs, quotes from the research interviews, and objects representing the concept of safety. The exhibition was considered essential to the photovoice process, as it provided a way for participants to share insights with a range of community stakeholders. However, the onset of the pandemic disrupted our attempts to hold a traditional gallery-based event. The purpose of this essay is to share how our research team collaborated with participants to re-envision the exhibition, and how the pandemic itself shaped our interpretation of participants' insights about safety and safe coping.

Re-envisioning the Exhibition

At the time COVID-19 was beginning to disrupt routines in the United States, participants had taken their photographs and participated in both individual and focus group interviews. We had nearly completed the planning of the exhibition when our local government issued a stay-at-home order on March 23, 2020. We were concerned that a crowd of people gathered together would likely be experienced as unsafe for many people concerned about COVID-19, so we decided to postpone the event. The decision to postpone the event was difficult in many ways. Many participants in the photovoice project were eager to move ahead with sharing their work and disappointed in not being able to hold the exhibition as planned. As we grappled with how to move forward, we initially decided against a virtual presentation. Although we agreed that virtual spaces can allow for the co-production of meaning for other community-based participatory research projects, we were concerned about how an exhibition that was only virtual could potentially restrict access for persons in poverty who are more likely to lack reliable access to internet. Furthermore, study participants communicated that physical and social environments that are both safe and validating contributed to their own process of growth, and we wanted to enact this theme through the exhibition by holding it in an accessible, physical space within a community where many participants lived. Therefore, the aesthetic experience we hoped to facilitate through the presentation was never meant to be just a product of viewing the photographs. We believed that a more dynamic, consummatory experience could emerge when persons gather together and interact in a shared space to engage with the exhibition.

Three months later, we recognized that the pandemic would not resolve any time soon, but we still wondered how we could follow through with the work we started. In July 2020, I (Nathaniel) participated in a virtual workshop facilitated by Con Christeson entitled *Co-Creating*

the Future. This workshop gathered approximately 20 artists and “creative beings of any discipline” to identify what is needed to keep creating in the world reshaped by the pandemic (C. Christeson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). The focus was on the collective, on what people needed when the normal outlets for expressing creative, community-based work were shuttered. As we complied with the region’s stay-at-home order, we each wondered in our self-contained Zoom rectangles where our creative works could find a home and, more fundamentally, what we needed to feel at home in the world. Through the conversations in this workshop, the notion became clearer that participants’ perspectives on safe coping were even more applicable in a world that seemed threatening in concretely new ways.

Throughout this workshop, the facilitator challenged us to re-imagine how we could share participants’ photos with the community and made her own studio space available to us. We shared this opportunity with participants and discussed it individually with them to solicit feedback, as we did not want to move ahead with the exhibition without incorporating their perspectives. In accordance with a trauma-informed care perspective, we prioritized participants having opportunities for choice and collaboration throughout the photovoice installation process. Before and during installation, participants were asked how they would like the exhibit to look and feel. They were invited to share what reactions or emotions they hoped viewers would experience upon seeing the work. Participants were then supported in identifying tangible representations of the abstract concepts they hoped to convey. For example, the windowsills framing the street-facing windows where photographs were mounted were lined with plants, quilts, and candles—all items that participants identified as embodying a safe, welcoming ambiance.

By re-imagining how to share participants’ photographs, we believe we found a way to connect their insights to others who may feel impacted by the pandemic. Presenting *Standing in the Balance* during the COVID-19 pandemic created unique challenges. However, it also necessitated creative experimentation in ways that enriched the installation and exhibition process. Although the exhibition differed significantly from the original installation plan, the alterations ultimately enhanced the exhibit’s accessibility to the public. Maximizing the exhibition’s accessibility in the context of a pandemic required us to adjust how and where it was shared with the community. The installation was mounted in a street-facing storefront at a local art studio rather than in a traditional gallery space contained within a building. This allowed for the organizers to host an opening where viewers could wear masks, maintain social distance, and remain outdoors. The street-facing nature of the installation also meant that it would remain viewable to all passersby throughout the time it was installed, from November 11-28, 2020. The second key adaptation that was made to maximize accessibility was livestreaming the opening via Facebook. Since several project participants and potential attendees were unable to attend an in-person event, the livestream allowed these individuals to view the installation and participate by sharing their perspectives through comments. Approximately 350 views of the livestream were recorded over the course of the event.

Mounted on the windows themselves were the photographs taken by participants, with illustrative quotes from the individual interviews and focus groups. Feedback from participants informed the orientation and relational aesthetics of these components. Participants expressed a preference for the photos mingling amidst each other, rather than being grouped by each artist.

Therefore, the photos were spatially oriented based on thematic similarity. Interview quotes were selected based on their poignancy and alignment with the concepts being visually conveyed. Participant quotes were then written on the glass window, serving as a link between potentially divergent visual experiences. One participant also highlighted how the St. Louis bus system is a key conduit for connection, communication, and transportation. To represent this observation, a color-coded “map” was constructed which linked the photographs to one another, wherein each color represented a code identified through the data analysis phase. The goal was to create an installation that embodied the complexity of each individual’s lived experience moving through trauma and substance use challenges, while de-stigmatizing mental illness by highlighting similarities in how we, as a community, collectively define and seek safety.

The event was promoted through local news outlets, social media, and through the university and community mental health center’s communications networks. It was important to us that the community be made aware of the exhibition as a way to honor the participants’ artistry and insight. Promoting the event and recording viewer responses were both prioritized as multiple participants stated that it was important to them to understand the impact the exhibit had on the community. To convey the event’s impact to participants, one researcher created a written list of viewer comments posted to the livestream and collected from a survey, which was given to each participant as a memento from the exhibition.

A brief online survey was created to assess viewers’ cognitive and affective reactions to *Standing in the Balance*; this survey was approved by the university’s institutional review board. The survey was shared on a QR code posted to the exhibition and as a link on the agency’s website. From a research perspective, the survey response rate was abysmal, with only three responses. However, from a reflective standpoint, the viewers’ comments provided validation of the project that could be shared with the study’s original participants. One respondent shared that they learned from the exhibit that “PTSD feels and looks differently from person to person.” This was supported by another respondent who stated that they learned that “human connection is stronger than the separation forced upon us” and that “photography is a beautiful way to share that separation amongst one another.” To this point, the final respondent remarked on the “power of community engagement and collaboration” reflected in the “power” of the curated content. For one viewer, *Standing in the Balance* provoked the realization “that for some, this feeling of isolation and alienation is not unique to this time” and that “you can really feel the collective effort of the moment.” Other participants reported feeling “connection, because all of the quotes and visuals resonated in some way with my PTSD.”

Revising our Findings: Staying Safe in the Pandemic

We opened this essay with Gadamer’s (1960/2004) assertion that “the picture contains an indissoluble connection with its world” (p. 138). I (Nathaniel) have a background in philosophy and periodically return to *On Germans and Other Greeks* (Schmidt, 2001) to inform my social science research. Gadamer’s (1960/2004) assertion provoked consideration of what ways participants’ photos remained connected to the world shaped by the pandemic, a line of questioning the first author shared with the other members of the research team. We considered whether our pre-pandemic exploration of safety could inform how we understand the current crisis. Our event is just one of many that were postponed or disrupted due to the

pandemic—including graduations, anniversaries, religious services, birthdays, funerals. What meaning does this project take on in a world that seems in many ways unfamiliar? For example, going into public for simple tasks like buying groceries may have felt or could continue to feel threatening, especially when others may choose not to follow public health advice like wearing a mask. We are hoping to find a way in which disruption can take on productive meaning that is as much personal as it is utilitarian for social work research and practice. It was overwhelming at times to sit with the uncertainty that has accompanied us at different times through the pandemic, and it was not initially obvious how participants' insights into safety translated to this unfamiliar experience.

Large-scale disasters, such as a pandemic, are associated with social and psychological ills such as trauma and stressor-related disorders, mood disorders, substance use, intimate partner violence, and child abuse (Czeisler et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2020). The first year of the pandemic was marked by increased unemployment, with millions filing for unemployment in the first few months of the pandemic in the United States (Kochhar, 2020); a rapid increase in firearm sales (Mannix et al., 2020); and social unrest related to police brutality and right-wing extremism. Each of these conditions may contribute to deeper senses of alienation associated with the degradation of social bonds. Disruption is felt through the interaction of biological, personal, and social factors. Social factors—such as systemic racism and poverty—have made communities more susceptible to the effects of the virus, especially communities of color (Lassale et al., 2020; Raisi-Estabragh et al., 2020). Because of differences in social conditions and ideology, “we are not all experiencing the same pandemic” (Newman, 2020, p. 32). This pandemic may rupture our expectations and assumptions about the world and force us to consider what material and psychosocial needs are most important for the time being. For some, these needs may include freedom of movement, hazard pay or access to personal protective equipment, connection, imagination, or feeling effective. Traumatic events can threaten people's conscious or unconscious assumptions of a *just world*—that bad things only happen to bad people—or the belief that enough of the world feels stable and predictable.

In our experience, the dual senses of *dehiscence* were useful for capturing the phenomenon of disruption underlying COVID-19. Dehiscence refers to (a) the surgical sense of a ruptured wound—messy, breaking open our expectations—and (b) the botanical sense of the seed pod that, upon maturation, bursts open (Lacan, 1977). The botanical sense of dehiscence draws attention to how a rupture may give way to new growth. As John Dewey (1934) stated, “Recovery is never the mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed” (p. 13). This dynamic is reminiscent of how Seeking Safety participants were able to disrupt their former patterns of responding to distress and to renegotiate the meaning of their traumatic experiences. We also feel this dynamic at play—breaking apart so that something generative and new may emerge—in the process of re-envisioning the exhibition.

Initially, we interpreted our findings in view of how people with traumatic stress and substance use cope safely with distress and argued for a socio-ecological model of post-traumatic growth and recovery (Dell et al., 2021). Given the far-reaching effects of the pandemic, we believe that participants' insights may generalize to the public in ways that would not have resonated prior to the pandemic. Through this project, participants communicated the importance of safety in

environments and the role of interpersonal relationships on feelings of safety. Participants described an array of skills that can be used creatively to cope with distress: “There are so many things that you can try, people that will help you, things you can do to get to where you need to be to address the issue.” Coping with distress was likened to a journey, in which one gradually becomes oriented towards more possibility. Furthermore, participants shared how, when they developed insight into what worked for them, they felt more sensitive to the struggles faced by others. Our belief that participants’ insights spoke to the present moment motivated us to press ahead with the exhibition, as we hoped that participants’ insights into the possible recovery from traumatic stress and substance use could resonate with those who have been negatively affected by the pandemic. The apparent gulf between now and 12 months ago transformed from a barrier to understanding to a facilitator of understanding the present moment. This is what Gadamer (1960/2004) calls the hermeneutic significance of temporal distance: “Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted” (p. 297).

Conclusion

We can only imagine how many other community-based or arts-based research projects were put on hold because of the pandemic. Finding ways to adapt and re-imagine our work can often lead to new discoveries and growth, for the researchers and participants, that we would not have otherwise experienced. Community-based photovoice exhibitions can continue to be held if there are resources for reimagining the installation. For us, that meant finding the support of an artist who was willing to let us install the exhibition in the studio’s street-facing storefront windows. Although we initially rejected holding a solely virtual exhibition, we found that using a hybrid virtual/community-based design facilitated access to a wider array of stakeholders. We were able to make participants’ photos publicly visible, as a temporary part of the neighborhood, and accessible via the livestream to those who, for instance, live in facilities put on lockdown during the pandemic. Study participants were also essential to making the event happen: At each major decision point related to the installation, we sought to include and incorporate participants’ perspectives. While some participants were content just to participate in taking photos and discussing them, others were just as committed to providing feedback on what they wanted to communicate through the exhibition—such as a feeling of home, or comfort, communicated through quilted textiles or sources of warm light as part of the exhibition. In the spirit of photovoice methodology, giving our participants a voice and active role in this re-imagining the installation provided opportunities for growth and learning by all of us involved and enhanced the project beyond our expectations. Creative arts approaches, such as photovoice, can facilitate verbal and non-verbal expression, and can be valuable for persons with serious mental illness, researchers, and practitioners for discovering insight into the recovery process. We hope that our narrative will provide encouragement to others to identify ways of adapting their projects to ever evolving times.

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