# Navigating multiple roles as a researcher in a Photovoice project

Hazel Bryce[1]

*Abstract: This article focuses on my experience of facilitating a Photovoice project within the context of a government funded outreach mental health team based in the UK. An auto ethnographic lens was used to explore my experience of being simultaneously a facilitator, researcher, participant and mental health professional during the project. Photovoice is a participatory action research methodology which values and shares peoples' expertise and intimate knowledge of their own communities, through the use of photographs and written captions. The theme for this group project was: the experience of participating in social activity groups that were facilitated by the outreach team. In this article I discuss and reflect on Photovoice methodology, and consider the multiple roles that I adopted and how this relates to insider and outsider positions whilst working with groups. I suggest that the notion of co-curation could be used to further understand and explore the exhibition that was produced. Co-curation is the process of collecting artefacts to produce an exhibition together which represents a shared aspect of life. In this instance photography is the chosen medium to facilitate co-curation.*

*Keywords: Photovoice; insider; outsider; curation; participatory; groupwork*

*1. Occupational Therapist*

*Address for correspondence: Sheffield Outreach Team, 101 Netherthorpe Rd, Sheffield S3 7EZ. hazel.bryce@shsc.nhs.uk*

## Introduction to Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory action research methodology based on health promotion principles, critical consciousness from education, feminist theory, and a community based approach to documentary photography, which emerged from the work of Wang in the USA (Wang and Burris, 1997). It values and shares people's expertise and intimate knowledge of their own communities through the use of photographs, written descriptions and stories which are produced by the participants (Andonian and MacRae, 2011).

Photovoice has three broad aims:

1.  To record and reflect the community's assets and concerns.
2.  To discuss issues of importance to the community in large and small groups, promote critical dialogue and produce shared knowledge.
3.  To reach policy makers.
    (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001)

This methodology involves a group of individuals meeting together and deciding on a topic or theme that they want to explore and raise awareness about. Participants take photographs which are shared and discussed in a group format. Captions are produced by the individuals and the group to illustrate and tell the story of the photograph. The group then decides which photographs and captions are used to form an exhibition. People are invited to see the photovoice exhibition which then can influence change.

Photovoice has been used in numerous contexts. It has been used with vulnerable populations successfully (Catalani and Minkler, 2009). These include mental health communities (Andonian, 2010; Fleming et al, 2009; Thompson et al, 2008). Andonian (2010) used Photovoice with five people who had mental health difficulties living in California, to explore questions about community participation within an urban environment. The participants took photographs on the theme of community participation, and then shared and explained their favourite image(s) to the group.

Andonian (2010) suggests that using photographs allows participants to share their intimate knowledge of their unique situation. This knowledge is then situated in the experiences of the individuals, rather

than as an abstract concept. Fleming et al (2009) similarly found that using photographs placed the context on the individuals and not on their illness. The use of images appears to produce a rich, culturally relevant source of data, which grounds the research in a personal context, and situates it in the individual's experience.

The methodology uses narrative alongside the image which enables an explanation of what the photographs meant to the person who took them. Telling stories values individual experiences and connects people together, fostering participation (Smith, 2005; Sikes, 2005; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

A British Photovoice organisation has been established which provides training and resources (www.photovoice.org).

## Description of the Photovoice project

In this section I describe the Photovoice project that I facilitated, and the development of the auto ethnographical methodology that was used to explore my experience of it.

The project took place from February to March 2011 in the North of England. The participants were all people receiving services from a specialist outreach mental health team, in which I am employed as an occupational therapist. This team is part of the National Health Service and funded by the Government. The team provides an intensive service to people who have complex mental health needs, usually with chaotic lifestyles and a history of numerous admissions to hospital. I have led other image projects within the team, which include using images to explore what 'hope' meant. It seemed a natural progression to continue to develop this shared interest with this group.

In February 2011, I approached those who had been involved with previous images work to discuss the possibility of doing a Photovoice project together. After this initial meeting, a group of five people including myself continued to meet each week for a total of ten sessions. In this project I adopted the role of participant, group facilitator and researcher. To explore this unique role I used auto ethnography which is further discussed later. An outline of the content of these sessions is described below.

## Outline of the Photovoice sessions

In the first session we discussed the nature of Photovoice, viewing images from another project, 'mental wealth' (Brandling and Wall, 2009), and completed ground rules. We decided to meet weekly at 3pm for an hour in the leisure centre cafe. This place was chosen as it was familiar, and followed on directly from an exercise group attended by the participants.

The second session covered the ethical use of the camera, and the importance of consent. Following a group discussion, a theme for the project was agreed as 'our experience of groups'. In this context, 'groups' meant the activities that were organised for the community by the mental health team in which I work. These are: an out and about group called the Monday group; an allotment group; a spirituality group; an art group; an exercise group; and a music group. After the second session we agreed to start taking photographs.

At the third, fourth and fifth sessions we discussed consent issues and how to get others involved, and considered the photographs that were taken between the sessions. As a group we started to consider how and where to display the photographs. At the end of the fifth session, photographs were selected by each participant that they felt best represented their experiences of 'groups'. Participants were told to select approximately five photographs each. However, participants selected three to ten. I took images for this project of my own experience of the groups as a participant.

The sixth session consisted of taking each participant's photographs in turn and composing captions for these photographs. Some of the participants chose to work on the captions individually whereas others wrote them as part of a group discussion.

The seventh and eighth sessions concentrated on reviewing the captions already produced, and composing captions for the remainder of the selected photographs. The photographs and captions were considered as a whole by the group. Where there were multiple photographs on the same theme, some photographs and captions were removed and other captions combined. Displaying photographs and captions led to representing individuals and the work of the outreach team (Wang and Burris, 1997). It was important to display both the individuals and the service in a 'true light'. Participants needed to be mindful of what was in their best interests both as individuals and for

the service. For example, one photograph that was taken was of a hand holding a cigarette. This led to an interesting discussion as to whether the participants wanted to be represented by smoking. In the end this photograph did not form a part of the exhibition.

During the ninth session, the exhibition was assembled. The boards were then exhibited as part of one of the activity groups. Plans were made to exhibit the photographs more widely in the future.

The group met for one last time as a celebration of what had been achieved and to review the project.

Initially I tried to plan the sessions, adapting structures that I had read in Photovoice manuals (Palibroda et al, 2009 and Photovoice Hamilton, 2007). It soon became apparent that following a rigid structure was not going to allow the flexibility, shared ownership, or the ability to work at participants' pace that I wanted.

## Data collection methods

In this section I describe how the data collection methods emerged as the project progressed.

The initial aim of the Photovoice project was to discover, capture and share the experiences of being part of 'groups' by taking photographs and annotating them with captions. I asked the participants if they wanted to take photographs and write captions on their experience of participating in the project as well as the 'groups'. This idea was welcomed. It was participatory and an extension of what was already taking place. It allowed me to record their experiences as they chose to share them. As the project developed I became interested in the dynamics of being a participant and facilitator in the project.

I wrote field diaries after each session, where I inserted the photographs and captions produced. The field diaries described the experience of doing the project and provided a commentary of what had taken place in the sessions. I was unable to write detailed field diaries of the sessions as I occupied a dual role of participant and facilitator.

I found that by developing an auto ethnographical lens I was able to explore my position within the research as both a participant and facilitator. Foster et al (2006) argue that auto ethnography is of particular relevance to mental health nursing research and practice because of its

reliance on the exploration of self, which is a fundamental component of mental health practice.

Coffey (1999) writes that:

> It is impossible to undertake fieldwork without entering into interactions with significant others. Moreover it is wrong to assume that the input and output of those interactions will be one-way. We should not even think about undertaking qualitative fieldwork without being prepared to become part of the interactions of the setting. (p.159)

This is exactly what I wanted to do through my research: to be situated in the Photovoice project and be a part of it. Foster et al (2006) describe it as a form of resistance to the researcher becoming an 'other'. I agree with Foster et al (2006) and found that using auto ethnography allowed me to explore and develop this position throughout the Photovoice project.

Auto ethnography has been critiqued for focusing too much on the self (Coffey, 1999). The researcher needs to balance their own experience with those of the participants, and make sure the voice of the latter is not overshadowed (Foster et al, 2006). I attempted to achieve this by balancing auto ethnographical field diaries with photographs taken by participants of their experiences.

## Results and discussion

The field diaries, which included both auto ethnographical material and examples of the photographs and captions to illustrate reflections, were subjected to thematic analysis. The themes that emerged were descriptive and not mutually exclusive but provided a way of collating and categorising the experiences. In the following discussion I concentrate on how I navigated multiple roles in the project as a mental health professional, researcher and participant, and I suggest that this Photovoice project is a form of co-curation. Many of the ideas contained in this discussion are applicable and transferrable to working with groups generally.

**Navigating multiple roles**

The field diaries revealed how I navigated through multiple roles as a mental health professional, researcher, and participant. The tensions of moving between these roles were apparent, particularly the desire to be seen as a participant and not primarily as a mental health professional.

The extract below from my field diary demonstrates a tension between my role as a researcher (where I wanted to situate myself as part of the Photovoice project), and that of my role as a mental health professional.

> I have also noticed that in some instances I have shied away from helping them directly with their mental health issues. This is because I want to act more as an equal with people on the Photovoice [project]. 14th April, 2011

To explore this tension further, I read about insider/outsider positions in research (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; McCulloch, 2008; Humphrey, 2007; Berger, 2001; Coghlan and Casey, 2001). Insider/ outsider positions are sometimes presented as a dichotomy where a researcher is either an insider or an outsider in relation to their research (McCulloch, 2008). This did not make sense for this research, as I occupied multiple identities that simultaneously made me an insider and an outsider. I was an insider as I took the photographs, but at the same time an outsider as I am employed as a mental health professional and not a service user.

Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), as academic psychologists, consider if qualitative researchers should be members of the population that they are studying and write about a space in between, which allows the researcher to occupy both the position of an insider and outsider. They argue against an approach where you are either in or out, and say that this is oversimplified. A dialectical approach, they argue, allows one to retain both the complexities of similarities and differences. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) point out:

> Holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference. (p.60)

My experience during the project is that I occupied the space in

between. The concept of a space in between is not a unique position just for the research, it is one that I can relate to throughout the groupwork I facilitate, in the sense that I both facilitate and participate in an activity jointly with service users.

In the extracts from the field diary below, one can see how the two worlds of the Photovoice project and mental health professional were operating at the same time. In other circumstances this could be the two worlds of a participant and facilitator.

> Before this, when I dropped my bags off I had been organising and talking to those there about a holiday that I am organising, this is in my role as a mental health worker not as a researcher. I felt that not answering their questions would have not been respecting them, as they see and know me primarily in my role as mental health worker. 14th April, 2011
>
> My primary role with them is about Photovoice. I have been trying not to directly always talk about the Photovoice project but I have noticed that both Ashley and Jo bring it up in conversation. Sometimes it is filling me in on their thoughts or progress other times it is for clarification and support around taking photographs. 14th April, 2011

Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that perhaps, as researchers, we can only ever occupy the space between. They say that we may be closer to the insider or closer to the outsider position. Our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher, which includes having read much literature on the research topic, therefore we cannot fully occupy one or other of those positions. I was aware of this gap in knowledge between the participants and myself, particularly in the area of research methodologies.

Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) do not investigate the moving between insider and outsider perspectives. I would suggest that the position of the researcher or group facilitator is not static, but changes and develops throughout the research or group. Initially I positioned myself closer to the outside, I then journeyed closer to an insider position.

Humphrey (2007) refers to being both an insider and outsider in her research on self organised groups among black people, disabled people and lesbians and gay men within trade unions in Britain. She talks about journeying between the different life worlds, which she terms as

'activating the hyphen between insider-outsider'. By taking control of the 'hyphen', I was defining my own identity within the research. One way in which I negotiated my own identity was by going to the gym before meetings so as to situate myself towards a participant role in the meetings rather than the role of mental health professional. Other participants all exercised in the leisure centre before the meetings. At other times participants pushed me towards the outsider position as a mental health professional by asking questions about a holiday that I was organising for the team in my role as an occupational therapist.

I found that the 'space in between' was a helpful concept for me as I did not view my roles of Photovoice researcher and mental health professional as diametrically opposed, rather as complementary to each other, as demonstrated in the following extract:

> At other times I am more situated in my role as mental health OT when I see them, but it has not felt uncomfortable being in role of researcher. I think this is because of the congruence of Photovoice to my daily job, and the fact that I have done other photography projects. 14th April, 2011

I viewed myself in both the roles of a researcher and mental health professional simultaneously, with different amounts of each emerging at different times. This is the same as how I viewed my roles as participant and facilitator of activity groups. I suggest that my experience of navigating between these two positions would have been different if Photovoice had not had congruence to my work as a mental health professional.

Coffey (1999), describing field work, suggests that identities are managed, crafted and shaped by the dialectic between the researcher and the researched (p.28). I was shaped by my relationship with the participants. This shaping is a two way process. I wrote in my field diary that I felt that my identity was shifting. This shift will continue into the future, as I will continue to work with the participants as a mental health professional. I would suggest that this shaping is not just the effect of the social relations but also the social and physical environment.

This project was different from other Photovoice research due to my role as a participant and facilitator rather than as an external facilitator. This helped to address the power imbalances between participants and facilitators that I observed in other Photovoice projects (Andonian, 2010; Brandling & Wall, 2009 and Thompson et al, 2008).

## Use of photographs and captions

The following are some examples of the photographs and captions that were produced jointly with the participants as part of the process described previously. To make the photographs more meaningful, a description of the context in which they were taken is provided. Faces have been blurred to preserve the identity of individuals. The following are some examples of the photographs and captions that were produced jointly with the participants as part of the process described previously.

Fig. 1. This picture was taken during the 'exercise group'.



*I think that the swimming sessions are good for us, both physically and mentally.*
*It is an easy going activity that suits us well.*

Fig. 2
This picture was taken on the 'Monday group' as part of a walk along a nature trail.



*The Monday group provides us with varied activities which we choose. I enjoy them quite*
*a lot it keeps my mind active trying new things. It gives us the opportunity to do some*
*therapeutic retail shopping plus group walks to enjoy the scenery of places we go.*

Fig. 3. These pictures were taken as part of the 'allotment group'. The first was taken on 8th March and the second once the vegetables had started to grow on 5th April.





*The allotment is lovely and peaceful. It is good to see the progress of the planted vegetables growing over the months. It is also providing me with a healthier diet.*

Fig.4. This was taken during the 'art group'



*Refreshments for the artists: A mug of tea keeps me going, can't beat a good brew.*

Fig. 5. This picture was taken on the 'Monday group' when we were visiting an industrial museum.



*Spaceman real or not real, we had a chuckle discussing what would it be like*
*if he jumped out on us.*

The photographs and captions given as examples above illustrate how Photovoice can be considered as a form of 'co-curation'. The act of curation is the process of organising and maintaining a collection of art works or artefacts (Oxford dictionary Online, 2011). In the examples above participants have taken photographs to represent part of their lives, in this case their experiences of 'groups'. By producing an exhibition, we are organising and using those artefacts in a process of 'curating the self'. We are using the images and captions to 'curate' or represent a part of our lives through the exhibition.

In producing the exhibition we represent the shared experience of the 'groups' whilst still valuing individual viewpoints. This makes it an example of both 'curating the self' and also 'co-curation', as participants worked together to form the exhibition and agreed together on which captions and photographs should be displayed. Other groupwork which involves these elements can also be thought of as 'co-curation'.

Durrant et al (2009), investigating the photographic portrayal of family members in the home, adopted the term 'home curation' to refer to the means by which photographic representations are coordinated across the home to portray the household. Crichton and Koch (2007) wrote about curating self-identity with people who have dementia, through a process of gathering stories about their lives. For Crichton and Koch (2007), curation is intimately connected with narrative, as through the stories told by others and the person, a picture is 'curated'

about that individual. For Photovoice, the process of curation involves using both the narrative and the image to tell the story.

The process of discussing the photographs and devising captions led to the co-researchers connecting together. This connection is discussed by occupational therapist Graeme Smith (2006) in a paper about the value of narrative:

> Whatever the story's message, for both the storyteller and the listener the experience connects them to each other, to their culture, and to their past, their present and their possible future. (p.310)

This was illustrated when discussing the following photograph of sweet jars; we reminisced smiling about our favourite sweets from our past. This is shown in the extract from my field diary from that meeting.

Fig. 6



> Similarly discussing about the sweets drew us all together and we talked briefly about old sweets. People told Jo how they liked the photo and all the jars together. Initially the photo was chosen because people liked it and it had been taken on a group but then a caption was found together. Choosing the caption together ensured joint ownership and identification. 14th April, 2011

Similarly when discussing the photograph of the space man (fig 5, above), we chatted and remembered the story, laughing and smiling together.

Whilst talking about the space man, they were recounting stories of being in that place. They were laughing about it, it was obviously a good time. I was not there at the time but all the others were, and this facilitated the telling of the story. As a group they started laughing together. 14th April, 2011

## Conclusions

Photovoice for me and the participants was part of a journey of discovery. This ongoing journey will enable future projects to become increasingly participatory as participants gain knowledge and experience of working in a more collaborative manner. The use of this methodology had the effect of positively impacting on the relationship between researcher and participant, and facilitated new ways of working together.

   The position I chose to occupy in the project as a participant as well as a facilitator enabled a greater sense of discovering together and a shared experience. As a paid professional, I am encouraged to facilitate activities for those with whom I work but not necessarily to join in collaboratively. This piece of research has enabled me to consider and challenge this position. I have discovered that situating myself as a participant and facilitator encouraged more collaborative working, and subsequently this is a position that I am increasingly choosing to adopt throughout the groups I facilitate. The concept of the 'space in between' was useful to me as this is the position I found myself in as both a facilitator and participant. I could choose to negotiate and move to more of an insider participant position or an outsider facilitator position. The negotiating and journeying between these two positions is applicable to much of the groupwork I facilitate.

   Photovoice can be thought of as a form of curation, with the images and captions forming an exhibition that aimed to show the experience of attending 'groups'. Each photograph and caption can be thought of as creating a story for the viewer as they interact with the exhibition. Every photograph has a story within it (Weiser, 2004). Photovoice is also a form of co-curation where together we produced an exhibition to represent a part of our lives. Curation and co-curation are areas that could be explored further in relation to Photovoice, creating any form of exhibition or display. Other work taking place in my community

can also be explained by the notion of curation. An exhibition is being produced for our local museum on the theme of 'coming home' in Sheffield. It consists of a wall made up of individual bricks, each one produced by an individual to represent their home.

A possible area for future research is around the insider – outsider role and the challenges and opportunities this brings within groupwork. The notion of curation and co-curation also needs to be further explored and investigated.

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