ENGAGING WITH MIGRANT LEARNERS AS CO-RESEARCHERS THROUGH PHOTOVOICE: GUIDELINES FOR TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, photovoice has gained considerable traction as a methodological approach for data collection. This article presents a reflexive account of our utilisation of photovoice for a qualitative doctoral research project that sought to capture the acculturation experiences of 12 immigrant adolescent learners in South Africa. Findings of the study offered rich and thick descriptions of co-researchers' perspectives on how to foster successful acculturation, which is a testament to how photovoice revolutionises conventional research methodologies. Accordingly, this article argues that by embracing photovoice, social workers can develop more culturally sensitive and effective interventions, rooted in authentic experiences of service users. Therefore, this study aims to educate readers by providing a comprehensive overview of the phases that were undertaken in our photovoice project. In addition, the article, explores the benefits and challenges associated with the application of photovoice, shedding light on the intricacies of participant engagement through visual storytelling and illuminating the ways in which this method can augment research outcomes and amplify the voices of marginalised individuals.

Keywords: co-researchers; participatory action research; personal reflections; photographs; photovoice; social workers

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Photovoice is a transformative and empowering process whereby researchers and co-researchers collaboratively generate knowledge and negotiate meanings through photographs (Kile, 2021). This innovative approach was developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1992 with the aim of providing individuals with the means to document and articulate the strengths and concerns of their communities (Budig *et al.,* 2018). The study's argument on the efficacy of the methodology rests on how photovoice enabled immigrant adolescent learners in our study to reclaim agency over their narratives by eliciting first-hand information about their acculturation experiences in South Africa. We extend this argument by positing that photovoice also has the power to transform social work research by empowering marginalised people to actively contribute to knowledge production through dialogue and reflection.

The implementation of photovoice proved to be a transformative experience for the learners, as it equipped them with the tools to capture their daily lives through a camera lens (Luescher, Fadiji, Morwe & Letsoalo, 2021; Shumba & Moodley, 2018). We observed from our research that photographing everyday environments and encounters allowed immigrant adolescents to provide an intimate glimpse into their world, which enabled us to explore the specific concerns that hold the most relevance and salience to them. In the social work context, intimate insight enables practitioners to tailor interventions and support services more effectively to address the specific concerns that hold the most relevance and salience to affected people (Malka & Langer, 2019).

The photovoice methodology enabled 12 immigrant adolescent learners in our study who acted as co-researchers to share information that would have been too sensitive for traditional research interviews. Thus, we agree with Ebrahimpour, Esmaeili and Varaei (2018), who assert that photovoice serves as a third eye to observe both overt and covert experiences. For example, sharing traumatic acculturation experiences in interviews can be emotionally distressing (Kile, 2021). Thus, photovoice allowed immigrant adolescents to convey their experiences without having to verbally relive the trauma. Moreover, the utilisation of the camera as a medium for self-expression granted immigrant adolescents a powerful means of communication to convey unique narratives, shedding light on the challenges, aspirations and desires in a manner that was both authentic and impactful.

We assert that similar to our study, photovoice can play a crucial role in advancing social work research by offering unique opportunities for engagement and empowerment. Suprapto *et al.* (2020) confirm that photovoice can augment social work research through its flexibility and participatory nature that allows a bottom-up process of engaging participants in data collection and analysis to promote a deeper understanding of the content of images. Malka and Langer (2019) add that visual storytelling does not only enrich a social worker's understanding of complex social phenomena, but also challenges existing narratives and stereotypes. This deeper understanding of complex social phenomena is essential to enable social workers to develop culturally responsive interventions and policies that address the diverse needs of marginalised populations, including immigrants.

Numerous South African studies attest to how photovoice emerges as a valuable tool in social work research (Luescher *et al.,* 2021; Nyika, 2022; Orth & Wyk, 2022). An early study by Graziano (2004) highlighted the potential of photovoice in addressing social justice concerns, such as oppression and resiliency among black gay men and lesbians in post-apartheid South Africa. The landmark study made strides in advocating for social justice and equality for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Graziano, 2004). A more recent study by Orth and Wyk (2022) explored the discourses of mental wellness among adolescents living with HIV in Cape Town, South Africa. The study's use of photovoice as a methodological approach offered a unique perspective on how these adolescents perceive and navigate mental wellness within the complexities of living with HIV in Cape Town (Orth & Wyk, 2022). These studies confirm that photovoice enables social workers to develop more culturally sensitive and effective interventions that are rooted in authentic experiences of service users.

However, doing research with photovoice has several methodological difficulties. One of the major obstacles is data analysis, since it requires researchers to understand both narrative and visual data to produce valid explanations and ideas (Luescher *et al*., 2021; Shumba & Moodley, 2018; Tsang, 2020). This proved to be a challenge in our study which demanded us to take certain measures. For example, we used the iterative technique of examining the data with co-researchers who took the pictures multiple times in order to derive deeper insights, refine interpretations and ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social workers can utilise various theories to underpin photovoice projects. The best theories for photovoice projects are ones that align with the participatory and visual nature of the methodology by prioritising aspects such as empowerment, reflexivity, community engagement and social change (Mukumbang & Wyk, 2020; Suprapto *et al*., 2020). Accordingly, our photovoice study was located within the critical realism paradigm, and utilised two theoretical frameworks: acculturation theory and the human capabilities approach.

We opted for critical realism as it enables social work researchers to analyse how social structures and systems impact on the experiences of individuals as depicted in photographs (Bogna *et al.,* 2020; Mukumbang & Wyk, 2020). Moreover, critical realism enabled an examination of the social, emotional, economic and political contexts that influence the lives of immigrant adolescent learners as captured through photography (Bogna *et al.,* 2020). Critical realism in our study also prompted an exploration of the root causes of issues such as discrimination as captured in the photographs by looking beyond the immediate manifestations, to understand the contributing structural, economic or cultural factors.

Our study deemed acculturation theory and the human capabilities approach as the most appropriate theories as they both align with the participatory nature of photovoice methodology by valuing the participation and inclusion of marginalised or vulnerable individuals (Berry *et al.,* 2006; Nyika, 2022). For example, acculturation theory aids in understanding and respecting co-researchers' cultural backgrounds by facilitating effective communication in addressing identity and integration issues (Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2022). On the other hand, the human

capabilities approach emphasises empowerment, well-being and freedom thus aligning with photovoice's participatory nature and its potential to amplify co-researchers' voices and lived experiences (Ebrahimpour *et al.,* 2018; Malka & Langer, 2019). Therefore, by incorporating theories that acknowledge the participatory nature of photovoice, social workers can ensure culturally sensitive and ethically sound photovoice projects that empower co-researchers to express and document their stories.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A robust research methodology plays a significant role in guaranteeing the success of photovoice projects. Suprapto *et al*. (2020) affirm that a proper research methodology ensures that photovoice projects yield meaningful, credible and ethically sound outcomes that can contribute to positive social change. Tartakovsky and Baltiansky (2022) add that a sound research methodology ensures that the data collected through photovoice methods is valid by accurately representing the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Accordingly, this section details the research methodology by discussing components such as research framework, research approach, research design, sampling strategy, data-collection methods, analysis techniques and ethical considerations.

Participatory action research (PAR) stands out as the most fitting framework for photovoice projects because of its prioritisation of collaboration and empowerment, which are fundamental aspects of photovoice (Chinn & Balota, 2023). Thus, our study was guided by the principles that govern PAR. Freire (1970) created a picture of the participatory research process by stating that dialogue has a horizontal relationship between the persons who are engaged in joint research. Moreover, Cornish *et al.* (2023: 2) defines PAR as "a collaborative, iterative, often open-ended and unpredictable endeavour, which prioritises the expertise of those experiencing a social issue". Therefore, our study utilised PAR as a boundary-breaking methodology that seeks to dismantle precincts of power, culture and status.

Moreover, our study adopted a qualitative approach as the best one for understanding the contextual factors that influence the production and interpretation of photographs (Carey, 2013). The qualitative approach also enabled us to investigate the sociocultural, historical and personal contexts in which the photographs were taken, allowing for a deeper understanding of the meanings and messages they convey. Thus, we were able to explore the stories behind the images taken by immigrant adolescent learners, the emotions they evoked as well as their cultural significance (Kile, 2021).

Furthermore, the study was exploratory in nature, and we utilised a multiple case study design to acquire an in-depth comprehension of the complex nature of being an immigrant adolescent learner in South Africa (Frahsa *et al*., 2023). The multiple case study design, whereby three schools that had more than 20 immigrant adolescent learners were chosen, allowed us to gain an intimate understanding of their acculturation experiences. We also reaped the benefit highlighted by Carey (2013) who attests that an added advantage of the multiple case study design is that it enables researchers to identify common themes, patterns and variations across different contexts thus enriching the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The research population for our photovoice study was all immigrant adolescent learners in schools that are in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Accordingly, four immigrant adolescent learners were purposely sampled from three schools, culminating a total of 12 co-researchers. We deemed a small sample size suitable for this study, since we focused on detailing each participant's narrative before explicating their shared experiences. Moreover, the small sample size was ideal as it enabled us to thoroughly examine each participant's photographs, narratives and reflections to identify patterns, themes and connections within the data (Tsang, 2020). This depth of analysis led to rich insights and a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, which was aimed at engaging with immigrant adolescent learners as co-researchers in co-constructing an acculturation strategy for integration into South African schools

We used cameras as the primary tool for data collection to capture pictures that were subsequently discussed through focus group discussions (FGDs). Thus, the first level of data analysis occurred in these focus group discussions through the SHOWED method, which is a set of standardised questions (Limaye *et al.*, 2018; Shumba & Moodley, 2018). The second level of analysis was conducted through participatory diagramming research techniques that include a variety of diagramming methods such as timelines, flowcharts and/or tables (Ciotoli, 2019). In the current study, participatory diagramming enabled the identification of primary themes from the photovoice presentations and engagements with the co-researchers. The third level of analysis utilised Tesch`s eight steps of thematic analysis whereby the collected data were organised into categories or topics to bring order and structure to the mass of collected data (Masutha *et al.*, 2023) and derive meaning.

Trustworthiness is a fundamental aspect of photovoice projects because of the unique nature of the methodology, which involves participants sharing personal experiences, perspectives and photographs (Frahsa *et al.*, 2023; Masutha *et al.*, 2023). Trustworthiness in our study was achieved by ensuring that findings closely reflect acculturation experiences as described by immigrant adolescent learners through involving them in every step of the research process as co-researchers. Firstly, we evaluated trustworthiness using Guba and Lincoln's (1991) credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability criteria. Secondly, the first author, being an immigrant himself, recognised that his identity as an immigrant, with its many layers, could influence the study by introducing potential biases or assumptions. In addition, this author could have been blind to certain nuances and may have benefited from introspection. Hence, a reflexive journal came in handy because it enabled the author to re-assess or reflect on how past experiences and assumptions could have been affecting the outcomes of the study.

Ethical considerations play an important role in photovoice projects to ensure that people's rights, dignity and autonomy are respected throughout the duration of the project. (Limaye *et al.*, 2018; Simmonds, Klandermans, Abrams & Sibley, 2015; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Thus our study adhered to a variety of ethical considerations relevant to the immigrant adolescent learners, such as voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality. Moreover, another primary ethical consideration for this study was that the co-researchers were below the age of 18 years. Hence, additional care, including acquiring ethics clearance, was taken to ensure that the rights of co-researchers were not infringed but were protected. Another

crucial aspect concerning ethics involves the ethical considerations that co-researchers must adhere to when capturing photographs. This is an essential aspect to the process of photovoice, hence will be discussed in detail later.

The methodology outlined here serves as the foundation upon which the subsequent steps of the project were built. The phases in the chapter that follows are meant to act as guidelines that provide a roadmap to other researchers who would want to use photovoice. Ultimately, the guidelines can serve as a valuable resource for both novice and experienced researchers seeking to maximise the full extent of photovoice as a powerful participatory research tool.

PHASE ONE: CHOICE OF PHOTOGRAPHY EQUIPMENT

The initial step we took in our photovoice project involved selecting the photography equipment. The equipment used for photovoice projects typically includes digital cameras, smartphones, disposable cameras or other digital imaging devices (Masutha *et al*., 2023; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). We chose to allow co-researchers to use their own smartphone cameras over other photography options, such as disposable cameras. We made this decision after considering several factors, such as the prevalence and ubiquitous nature of mobile phones in South Africa. There is evidence that the percentage of adolescents using mobile phones in South Africa is substantial, with studies indicating high ownership and usage rates (Mukumbang & Wyk, 2020; Orth & Wyk, 2022). For example, a study focusing on urban and peri-urban sites in South Africa found that almost all participants (99%) had a personal cellular phone, reflecting widespread ownership (Mapetla *et al*., 2021).

We also chose smartphone cameras because they were familiar to most users, as well as for their functionality and flexibility (Limaye *et al*., 2018). The study's immigrant adolescent learners agreed that they were more comfortable with what they were familiar with; we believed that using familiar technology would improve participation and reduce anxiety about technological challenges. Furthermore, smartphone cameras do not require film development and have no limit on the number of photos that can be taken (Kile, 2021). Another advantage of using smartphones was that photos could be easily organised and accessed by immigrant adolescent learners and viewed on a large screen during group discussions.

PHASE TWO: TRAINING AND PHOTOGRAPHIC SKILLS

After the selection of photography equipment, it is essential that the participants/co-researchers receive training on how to take proper photographs. This is against the backdrop that photography skills may not come naturally for some people. In substantiation, Wang (2020) cautions that that since photovoice is a goal-directed activity, it is essential for co-researchers to understand both how to capture photographs and which images are most suitable for effectively addressing the study's objectives. As such, we offered immigrant adolescent learners training on how to take good quality photographs and to write good narratives. Masutha *et al*. (2023) add that training is important in photovoice, because the success of projects depends on the co-researchers having a grasp of photography basics. Accordingly, training in our photovoice project had several key components.

First, we outlined the study`s objectives and purpose, highlighting how the participation of co-researchers and the use of photographs would contribute to the study's research and advocacy goals. Second, in line with the advice by Ebrahimpour *et al.* (2018), we addressed ethical considerations, emphasising the importance of understanding the rights and responsibilities of co-researchers involved in the project. Third, we introduced co-researchers to the photovoice methodology, explaining its underlying principles and how it differed from conventional research methods. We emphasised the concept of visual storytelling, clarifying that their photographs would serve as a means to convey personal experiences and perspectives. Fourth, following the guidance of Frahsa *et al.* (2023), we emphasised the collaborative nature of the project, encouraging co-researchers to share their photographic narratives and interpretations with one another. Finally, we evaluated co-researchers' existing photographic knowledge and comfort with cameras or smartphones, and then provided basic training on photography techniques, including aspects such as composition, lighting and framing, as detailed in the next section.

In addition to the main training, co-researchers received instruction in several key aspects of photography. Firstly, they were educated on composition principles, including concepts such as framing, the rule of thirds, leading lines and balance, enabling them to grasp how the arrangement of visual elements within the frame contributes to the creation of visually appealing and engaging photographs (Burles & Thomas, 2014). Secondly, the significance of lighting in photography was elucidated, with insights into how it can influence the mood and atmosphere of an image (Fernández & Langhout, 2018). Techniques for harnessing natural light, recognising various lighting conditions (e.g., backlighting, front lighting), and effectively utilising shadows and highlights were shared. Thirdly, co-researchers learned how to attain proper focus and comprehend the concept of depth of field, with guidance on adjusting the camera's focus settings and aperture to control subject sharpness and introduce depth in the image (Ciotoli, 2019). Finally, experimentation with diverse perspectives and angles was encouraged, emphasising the transformative potential of altering the camera's position (e.g., high, low, eye level) to provide distinctive viewpoints and modify the visual storytelling within the image. Once the co-researchers understood the key aspects of photography and knew how to take quality pictures, the co-researchers could proceed to the next phase, which is taking photographs. The process of taking photographs is discussed in the section that follows.

PHASE THREE: TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS

The first stage before taking photographs is the development of a prompt (Wang, 2020). A prompt in photovoice is a carefully crafted question or topic of inquiry that guides participants in capturing photographs that reflect specific aspects of their community or experiences (Frahsa *et al.,* 2023; Malka & Langer, 2019; Wang & Burris, 1997). It serves as a focal point for participants, directing their attention towards particular issues, strengths or concerns that researchers aim to explore (Tsang, 2020). Thus, you can create a prompt based on your topic or the objectives of your study.

In our study, the prompt was as follows: Take photographs of landscapes, objects, situations or symbols anywhere in your school and home environment to express what you perceive as shaping your experiences as an immigrant adolescent in South Africa. Co-researchers were

given a 30-day period to take five photographs. The request for co-researchers to take photographs over a thirty-day period instead of the entire duration of the study was based on the rationale that a long period of photographing could lead to co-researchers being unable to remember and articulate the experiences and narratives associated with each photograph (Orth & Wyk, 2022; Surapto *et al*., 2020). Each of the photos was accompanied by a narrative, see Figure 1.

I took this picture of people distant from each other, because to me it represents what I consider to be the biggest challenge for immigrants. Sometimes it is hard to interact, not because you don't want to, but sometimes because you don't know the language to use for interacting. This is hard because as an immigrant you would like to fit in, so that you can feel that you belong (Pseudonym: Nathan)

Figure 1: **Picture and narrative**

Pictures are a tool for conveying important and essential information. For example, the pictures in Figure 1 are taken on a dark background to convey a sense of isolation or solitude. Moreover, the darkness conveys Nathan's individuality or separation from South African people with whom he cannot interact. Thus a researcher opting for photovoice must understand that every aspect of a picture conveys a certain meaning and significance to the photographer. Malka and Langer (2019) assert that such underlying nuances can be probed during focus group discussions in order to acquire rich and thick descriptions of the subject under study. Understanding the underlying nuances is part of data analysis. Thus data analysis is the phase that comes after pictures have been taken and is discussed in the next section.

PHASE FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

Ostaszewska (2018) attests that in photovoice, the process of taking pictures is secondary to the interpretation of the photographs' contents. We concur that the interpretation of photographs in photovoice is pivotal as it amplifies participant voices whilst forming the basis for positive change within communities. Hence, the interpretation of photos is the first step of analysis and was conducted with the direct participation of immigrant adolescent learners as co-researchers. The photographs were interpreted through the SHOWED method and participatory diagramming (Simmonds *et al*., 2015; Tsang, 2020). The data were later processed using Tesch`s eight steps of thematic analysis.

SHOWED Method

The SHOWED method refers to a set of standardised questions used to interpret photos (Tsang, 2020; Wang, 2020). The method relied heavily on a technique known as photo-elicitation to elicit information about the photographer (Ciotoli, 2019). Photo-elicitation involved immigrant adolescent learners to use the SHOWED method to respond to their images, attributing their social and personal meanings to the picture by telling stories about what was happening in photographs. See Table 1 for a full description of the method.
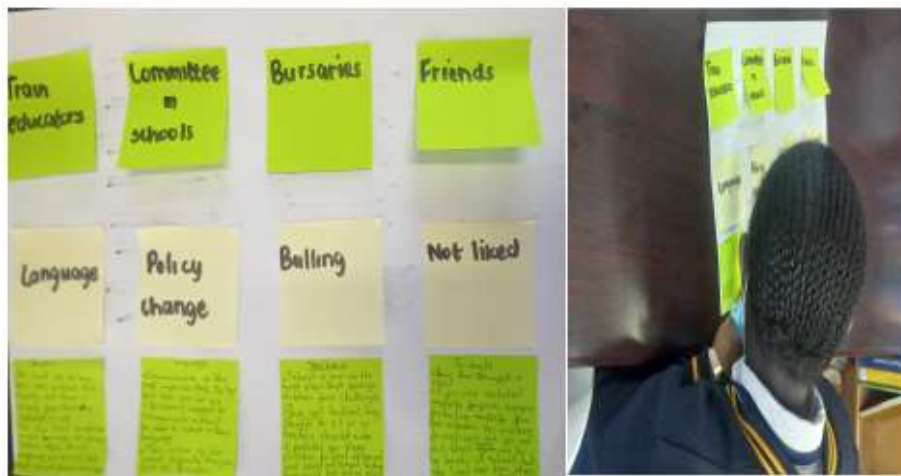
Table 1: **The SHOWED method**

Acronym	Facilitator's Prompt	Co-researcher`s Actions
S	What is **seen** by the co-researchers?	The co-researcher describes what they see in the photograph.
H	What is **happening** here?	The co-researcher describes what is happening in the picture that may not be seen by others.
O	**How** does this relate to acculturation?	The co-researcher describes how the picture relates to the photo prompt.
W	**Why** does this situation, concern or strength exist?	The co-researcher hypothesises about the factors that contribute to what is happening in the photograph.
E	How does this image **educate** us?	Co-researcher describes how the image can educate stakeholders in the well-being of immigrant adolescent learners.
D	What can I/we **do** about it?	Co-researchers suggest recommendations for an acculturation strategy for integration.

In the context of social work and data analysis, the SHOWED method proves invaluable as it empowers clients and community members by actively involving them in the data collection and analysis process, fostering a sense of ownership over their experiences (Malka & Langer, 2019). This participatory approach encouraged immigrant adolescent learners to reflect on their own narratives and their role in the context of broader societal issues, thus facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the subject under discussion. Furthermore, this method aligns with a client-centred approach, placing clients' needs and perspectives at the forefront of decision-making and interventions (Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2022). Whilst the person presenting was showing their pictures, the other focus group discussion participants engaged in the process of participatory diagramming as discussed in the section that follows.

Participatory diagramming

The idea of using participatory diagramming emerged from the need for participatory approaches in analysing photovoice data. Participatory diagramming (see Figure 2) is a method used in participatory action research (PAR) that involves the creation of visual diagrams by co-researchers themselves to convey meaning and structure to others (Jackson & Mumma, 2022). It is a tool that allows co-researchers to express their views based on their real experiences regarding a subject (Kesby, 2004). Participatory diagramming uses available materials such as paper, boards and colour-coded cards to create charts that connect co-researchers' responses with prompt questions, guiding the discussion in co-design workshops facilitated by a PAR researcher (Vásquez-Guevara *et al*., 2022). In our doctoral study, participatory diagramming was used for the identification of primary themes from the photovoice presentations and engagements. Figure 2 shows one of the co-researchers engaging in participatory diagramming.

Figure 2: **Participatory diagramming by one of the co-researchers**

The themes identified by co-researchers formed the foundation for Tesch's eight steps of data analysis (Masutha *et al.,* 2023). To ensure that co-researchers remained at the forefront of the study, the themes that they identified were used in the write-up, as advocated for PAR.

The section that follows explores some of the essential discussions relating to photovoice. It will start by exploring the ethics pertaining to photography, then photovoice as a transformative social work research tool, advantages of using photovoice, the challenges that we encountered and finally recommendations and guidelines for applying photovoice in social work research with adolescents. We believe that knowledge of these issues will give any prospective photovoice researcher foundational information on the photovoice research methodology

ETHICS PERTAINING TO PHOTOGRAPHY

Ebrahimpour *et al*. (2018) attest that ethical principles should be applied consistently in executing photovoice, because personal property is shown in photos and privacy is an issue. In educational research, as in our study, photographs that were taken by co-researchers that showed the faces of other learners or distinct symbols such as a school badge, could raise ethical concerns (Simmonds *et al.,* 2015). Therefore, it was deemed essential for co-researchers

to know when it is appropriate to take a photo and how to seek consent (Limaye *et al.*, 2018). Hence, we provided co-researchers with appropriate training on how to seek consent, and take photos. According to Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), consent in photovoice covers three aspects: (1) researcher and the participant, (2) participant and third parties in pictures, and (3) consent given to the researcher to distribute (in whatever form) the co-researchers' photographs and narratives.

Accordingly, co-researchers were thoroughly informed about the ethics of photography to avoid jeopardising their rights and those of third parties. We also heeded the advice by Jackson and Mumma (2022) that co-researchers should be aware of any cultural or social sensitivities that may exist in the context of their research. Thus, we emphasised to the co-researchers the importance of being respectful of cultural practices and beliefs by avoiding any actions that may be considered offensive or intrusive.

The question of ownership is a contentious issue in photovoice. According to Ebrahimpour *et al.* (2018), co-researchers give up sole ownership of photos by signing the consent form. On the other hand, Tsang (2020) argues that the co-researchers own the photographs that they take. Simmonds *et al*. (2015) strike a balance between the two views by stating that the ethical obligation in this regard is met by giving the co-researchers a copy of each of the photographs that they took. In the current study, the selection of photos was based on co-researchers' choice and published with their consent. The co-researchers were also informed about the study's target audience and the potential publication venues for the photos.

PHOTOVOICE AS A TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH TOOL

Photovoice plays a significant role in social work practice by empowering individuals and communities to actively participate in the research process, express their perspectives, and advocate for social change (Nyika, 2022; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). In addition, the methodology finds a range of applications in social work, including public health promotion, needs assessment, programme planning, and advocacy for family, maternal and child health (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Chinn & Balota, 2023). By involving co-researchers in a collective process of critical reflection, photovoice enables them to document their experiences and life realities, while striving for transformative change in their communities (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Moreover, photovoice facilitates participatory needs assessment, evaluation and engagement with policymakers to enhance the welfare of community members (Vásquez-Guevara *et al*., 2022).

The utilisation of photovoice in social work practice offers several advantages. It serves as a conduit for exploring lived experiences, identifying community assets and needs as well as promoting social justice and empowerment (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997). Moreover, photovoice fosters a deeper comprehension of community issues through dialogue, reflection and knowledge sharing among co-researchers, which facilitates collaborative solutions (Wang & Burris, 1997). Furthermore, photovoice provides a platform for marginalised populations, such as the immigrant adolescents in our study, to voice their concerns and to challenge prevailing power structures (Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2022).

In addition, photovoice also plays an instrumental role in decolonising social work research. One of the key aspects of decolonising research is recognising and valuing different ways of knowing and understanding the world (Budig *et al.*, 2018). Photovoice allows individuals to express their perspectives and experiences through visual storytelling, which can be particularly powerful for marginalised communities, whose voices are often silenced or marginalised in traditional research approaches (Nyika, 2022). Thus, photovoice can challenge dominant narratives and knowledge systems that have historically been imposed on marginalised communities; it does this by prioritising the voices and experiences of community members, ultimately serving as a means of decolonising research.

Photovoice can also act as a tool for conducting community assessment and needs identification within the sphere of social work practice. By design, this method fosters the active involvement of individuals and communities in the research process, thereby providing them with a platform to articulate their perspectives and advocate for social change (Wang & Burris, 1997; Catalani & Minkler, 2009). In addition, the medium of photography empowers community members to visually capture and record their lived experiences, strengths and concerns (Chinn & Balota, 2023). Through the facilitation of group discussions and critical reflection on the photographic depictions, co-researchers can engage in substantive dialogue, share profound insights, and collectively discern and articulate the multifaceted needs existing within the community (Luescher *et al.*, 2021; Shumba & Moodley, 2018; Tsang, 2020).

The use of photovoice in community assessment and needs identification has several advantages. It allows for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and voices, particularly from marginalised populations (Wang & Burris, 1997). As an illustration, photovoice in our study promoted active engagement and participation, empowering immigrant adolescent learners to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. It also provided a visual and tangible representation of community needs, making them more accessible and understandable to policymakers and other stakeholders (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Malka & Langer, 2019).

Overall, our experience of utilising photovoice leads us to assert that photovoice is an invaluable tool in social work practice, as it enriches research endeavours whilst empowering individuals and communities to drive positive change. Photovoice's multifaceted applications and ability to amplify marginalised voices make it a transformative and socially impactful methodology for social workers striving to create inclusive and equitable societies (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

ADVANTAGES OF USING PHOTOVOICE

We noted from our doctoral study that one notable advantage of employing photovoice is its capacity to yield rich and nuanced data, surpassing the limitations of traditional research methods. We agree with Chinn and Balota (2023), who attest that the amalgamation of visual images alongside verbal descriptions contributes to a deeper comprehension of co-researchers' lived experiences. Moreover, the photographs captured by the co-researchers were particularly revealing as they conveyed a spectrum of emotions, contextual nuances and intricate details that might have been challenging to express through words alone. In retrospect, we realised that the adoption of photovoice profoundly enriched our research endeavour, providing a

holistic understanding of immigrant adolescent learner`s perspectives and fostering a profound connection with their stories.

The current study supports the view that photovoice is an important vehicle for empowering participants by giving them a voice in the research process (Nyika, 2022; Orth & Wyk, 2022; Surapto *et al*., 2020). This participatory research method allowed us to witness the genuine empowerment of immigrant adolescent learners as they actively engaged in the research process, asserting their agency to express their perspectives and advocate for meaningful social change. For example, we observed how immigrant adolescent learners skilfully documented their lived experiences, capturing intimate glimpses of their strengths, vulnerabilities and aspirations, which enriched the research with compelling visual narratives (Wang, 2020). In addition, the process of group discussions and critical reflection on the photographs sparked vibrant and enlightening dialogues, allowing co-researchers to share their profound insights and jointly recognise the pressing needs that demanded attention and intervention (Luescher *et al*., 2021; Wang, 2020).

Furthermore, as corroborated by Mizock, Russinova and DeCastro (2015), the visual nature of photovoice proved to be a potent instrument in elevating awareness about the experiences of immigrant adolescent. For example, the comprehensive and authentic data yielded through photovoice in our doctoral study is now an indispensable asset in supporting evidence-based decision-making processes, thereby fostering more targeted and effective interventions to improve the wellbeing and quality of life for immigrant adolescent learners. In this way, the integration of photovoice did not only enrich the research findings, but also instilled a profound belief in the transformative power of participatory research methods within the realm of social work.

In summary, photovoice offers several advantages in research, including empowering co-researchers, capturing rich data, promoting community engagement and being adaptable to various research contexts (Masutha *et al*., 2023; Mizock *et al*., 2015; Wang & Burris, 1997). Its participatory and visual nature makes it a valuable tool for understanding and addressing complex issues from the perspectives of those directly affected.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

During our study, we noticed that photovoice projects can be time-consuming and labour-intensive. Luescher *et al*. (2021) explain that this is primarily because of the multiple steps that need to be taken, including training co-researchers on camera usage, capturing photographs, conducting focus group discussions and analysing the data. Catalani and Minkler (2009) conducted a systematic review of photovoice literature and found that highly participatory projects can be time-consuming, particularly in terms of the photography assignment, individual interviewing and the completion of assessment instruments.

It was also difficult to recruit co-researchers. Photovoice projects require co-researchers who are willing and able to take photographs and engage in group discussions or interviews about the images (Burles & Thomas, 2014; Mukumbang & Wyk, 2020). In addition, Shumba and Moodley (2018) concur that recruiting co-researchers for photovoice projects can be challenging because of factors such as obtaining informed consent, ensuring representation and

addressing potential risks. As an illustration, some immigrant adolescent learners in the initial pool of co-researchers were not comfortable taking photos or sharing their thoughts and feelings through images. Thus, ensuring diversity and representation within the participant group was a challenge, as some individuals were hesitant to participate because of privacy concerns or fear of stigma. Therefore, we advise researchers utilising photovoice to be prepared to invest time and effort in recruiting co-researchers and implementing appropriate recruitment strategies to ensure the successful engagement of co-researchers in the research process.

According to Chinn and Balota (2023), another challenge normally faced in photovoice projects relates to ethical considerations. They include issues of privacy, informed consent, representation, minimising risks, maximising benefits, and ensuring accurate and truthful representation of subjects. Co-researchers may capture images that reveal sensitive or personal information, such as their identity (Ebrahimpour *et al.*, 2018). We recommend that researchers utilising photovoice should carefully take these ethical considerations into account and implement appropriate measures to protect the rights and wellbeing of co-researchers. In our study, we navigated some of the ethical pitfalls by educating the co-researchers on how to obtain informed consent as well as ensuring confidentiality and protecting co-researchers' privacy.

In addition, the data obtained through photovoice can be difficult to analyse (Burles & Thomas, 2014). Photos can be open to interpretation, which can make it difficult to draw clear conclusions from the data. This can be especially challenging if the co-researchers are not able to provide clear explanations of their photos (Mizock *et al.,* 2015). We countered this challenge by heeding the advice of Wang and Burris (1997), who highlighted the need for participatory analysis in photovoice projects in order to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues. Thus, our first level of participatory analysis was through the SHOWED method (Table 1) in focus group discussions with immigrant adolescent learners, which was corroborated by participatory diagramming (Figure 2). Tsang (2020) discussed the challenges in photovoice data analysis and proposed a strategy that involves analysing both visual and narrative data to generate a more credible explanation and theorisation of the phenomenon. Thus, we asked the immigrant adolescent learners in our study to provide written narratives of each of the pictures taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING PHOTOVOICE IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH WITH ADOLESCENTS

A successful photovoice project starts with a clear purpose that defines its goals (Chinn & Balota, 2023; Suprapto *et al.,* 2020). Understanding what you want to achieve allows you to shape the project accordingly. A project can be tailored by selecting the right co-researchers, designing relevant activities and creating an environment that fosters engagement, aligning with your objectives.

As dictated by the principles of PAR, co-researcher involvement is crucial for a successful photovoice project (Chinn & Balota, 2023; Cornish *et al.*, 2023). Involvement goes beyond tokenism and involves genuine co-creation and collaboration (Freire, 1970). The engagement

of co-researchers as active collaborators enhances authenticity and relevance, resulting in deeper findings and a democratic atmosphere where participants' voices are valued.

As illustrated in the preceding sections, the provision of photography skills is essential as it enables co-researchers to capture compelling images, thus enhancing the quality of visual content and fostering creativity (Masutha *et al.,* 2023; Wang, 2020). This training empowers individuals to make meaningful contributions to the project.

Ethics play a fundamental role in participatory research methods such as photovoice. Thus, co-researchers must have a clear understanding of ethical considerations, which include obtaining consent and respecting privacy (Ebrahimpour *et al*., 2018; Simmonds *et al.,* 2015). Additionally, it is crucial to take into account cultural, social and emotional sensitivities to ensure the integrity of the project is maintained.

Patience is a crucial element in photovoice projects. Co-researchers may require time to acclimate, become comfortable with cameras and discover their expressive voice through images (Catalani & Minkler, 2009; Luescher *et al*., 2021). Approaching photovoice as an ongoing journey facilitates organic engagement and depth in the process.

Moreover, flexibility is crucial in participatory research (Frahsa *et al*., 2023). We noted from our photovoice project that plans constantly evolve based on participant experiences and feedback. Adapting the project in response demonstrates a commitment to listening and valuing input, making it a truly collaborative effort which reflects authentic voices and experiences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we are confident in asserting that photovoice can play an instrumental role in revolutionising research, especially in the field of social work. It transcends traditional methodologies by empowering participants to express issues of priority to them. This article has illuminated the versatility and efficacy of photovoice, emphasising its potential to bridge gaps between academia and lived experiences. As scholars and practitioners continue to explore innovative approaches to qualitative inquiry, the adoption of photovoice stands as a promising avenue for promoting inclusivity, cultural sensitivity and authentic engagement in research endeavours. The study with immigrant adolescents has proven that embracing the dynamic interplay of images and narratives, can enrich researchers` understanding of social phenomena, ultimately contributing to more informed and impactful interventions for positive societal change**.**

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