

# **Photovoice as a Culturally Competent Research Methodology for African Americans**

by

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## **Abstract**

Photovoice in an innovative, community-based participatory action research methodology utilized primarily with marginalized and oppressed populations. Photovoice allows individuals to share their perceptions and lived experiences through photography and narration. Although photovoice has grown in popularity in previous years, few researchers in the social science literature have implemented photovoice with African Americans. The Afrocentric Paradigm and the Social Constructivist Framework guide this discussion of the development and implementation of a culturally appropriate research methodology with African Americans through the lens of photovoice.

## **Previous Research with African Americans**

Billingsley (1968) points out the significant mistreatment of Black families by social scientist in the past have contributed to the negative and distorted images of African American families in today's society. The patterns of African American families' behaviors tend to differentiate from that of the majority, which often results in such behaviors being viewed as deviant. It is also important to note that early survey research data gathered about African Americans were fueled by the need to compare them with whites. Additionally, prior to the 1980's there were only nine cross sectional studies which included at least 900 African Americans. A closer look at these studies revealed that only three of these studies attempted to include a cross section of the African American population. The remaining studies collected and reported data that only represented a certain region or community (Hilderbrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2000). The underrepresentation and often misinterpretation of African Americans in the research literature also extends to the lack of culturally appropriate theoretical models.

Blackwell (1996) argues that the absence of theoretical models developed by black scholars describing the authentic black experience in America is a vexing problem for ideologists of "blackness." McAdoo & McAdoo (1994) suggest that scholars should spend less time labeling and placing blame and spend [Delete the previous word "spend"] more time seeking positive solutions for positive role functioning in African American families. Although defining "Blackness" may be a difficult task due to the variations in African American families, the inclusion of Black scholars' writings helps to provide a balanced view of African Americans in the research literature. There is a strong need for the development of appropriate theoretical models and the enhancement of previous models that accurately depict the "Black experience" and the Black family. Furthermore, social science researchers also must consider utilizing research methodologies that are culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate for African Americans. This article provides a culturally appropriate framework and research methodology for use with populations of color.

## **Afrocentric Paradigm and the Social Constructivist Framework**

Much consideration has been given to cultural sensitivity and cultural diversity in the social science literature. Cultural sensitivity however, has often been limited to adapting theoretical models or existing practice models to suit people of color, with an emphasis on racism. Schiele (1996) explains this phenomenon as such; “failure to use the cultural values of people of color in developing new models can be viewed as an implicit expression of Western ethnocentrism, or the belief that Eurocentric values are the only values that can explain behavior and should be the basis for solving people’s problems” (p.284). Applying primarily Eurocentric theoretical models to populations of color in the classroom suggest that such individuals share the values of the dominant culture. The Afrocentric Paradigm gives particular attention to African American values and culture, which provides important leverage for a more accurate depiction in the research literature. The primary objectives of the Afrocentric Paradigm are as follows:

- It seeks to promote an alternative social science paradigm more reflective of the cultural and political reality of African Americans.
- It seeks to dispel the negative distortions about people of African ancestry by legitimizing and disseminating a worldview that goes back thousands of years and that exists in the hearts and minds of many people of African descent today.
- It seeks to promote a worldview that will facilitate human and societal transformation toward spiritual, moral, and humanistic ends and that will persuade people of different cultural and ethnic groups that they share a mutual interest in this regard (Carruthers, 1981; Diop, 1978).

The Afrocentric paradigm offers three assumptions about human beings which include:

- Human identity is a collective identity- individual identity is viewed as a fluid and interconnected way uniquely expressing a collective or group ethos, with an emphasis on sharing, cooperation, and social responsibility. (Daly et al., 1995; Kambon, 1992; Martin & Martin, 1985).
- The spiritual or nonmaterial component of human beings is just as important and valid as the material component- the invisible universal substance that connects all human beings to each other and to a social inquiry and is not limited to directly observable or quantifiable phenomena (Schiele, 1995).

- The affective approach to knowledge is epistemologically valid- feelings and emotions are viewed as valid source of knowing. Thoughts and feelings are interconnected and represent the most direct experience of self. (Akbar, 1984; Asante, 1988; Bell et al., 1990; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Dixon, 1976; Everett et al., 1991; Harris, 1992; Kambon, 1992; Myers, 1988; Nobles, 1980; Schiele, 1990).

The African centered worldview is a collective concept which fosters a group identity culture. The Afrocentric Paradigm considers important cultural aspects of African American families that have been excluded from previous theoretical models. The nonmaterial or spiritual component of individuals is heavily emphasized in the Afrocentric Paradigm. Another important characteristic of the Afrocentric Paradigm involves the validation of affective knowing among African American populations. Affective knowing is particularly important when interpreting experiences such as discrimination and racism with populations of color. Culturally appropriate research methods should account for important aspects of African American lives such as spirituality and affective experiences.

The Afrocentric Paradigm and the Social Constructivist Perspective offer a unique framework for developing research studies with African Americans. Both perspectives allow the researcher to view the participant within his or her own cultural context. Knowledge about the participants' culture, norms, values and experiences help to facilitate the qualitative research process. The Social Constructivist Perspective is congruent with basic tenets of the Afrocentric Paradigm that include, the importance of the participant's perception regarding the nature of reality and the importance of context in the assessment of human emotion, cognition and behavior (Goldstein, 1990; Furman, Jackson, Downy, & Shears, 2003). Social constructivists argue against the notion that an objective, external reality is captured apart from the context in which it is socially viewed, understood and constructed (Mahoney, 1995). The Social Constructivist Perspective heavily considers the stories or perceptions of reality as experienced by an individual and accounts for his or her worldview (Furman, et. al, 2003; Greene, Jensen, & Jones 1996; Ibrahim, 1985). Researchers should properly account for the worldview of research participants.

## **Researcher Characteristics**

Merton (1972) identifies the "insider-outsider" controversy, which explains objectivity of researchers as follows; "Advocates of the insider doctrine maintain that members of a given racial or ethnic group, who are usually "outsiders" to the dominant group, are more uniquely qualified to provide meaning to their experiences than are individuals who are not members of that group. On the other hand, outsiders claim that, by not being members of such groups, they are able to bring intellectual objectivity to the analysis of the experiences of less favored and often oppressed groups" (p. 9).

The “insider-outsider” controversy raises the question of; who is qualified to conduct research on African American populations? No researcher is without bias; therefore minority researchers as well as non-minority researchers must be aware of their own biases. It seems as if researchers would want to explore one’s (subject) lived experiences, rather than perceiving one’s (subject) lived experience through their own clouded lens. Both “insiders and outsiders” are capable of conducting scholarly research when biases are acknowledged and accounted for properly.

Schiele (1996) addresses the “insider-outsider” controversy by offering the following perspective; “the practice of using Eurocentric theories to explain the behavior ethos of African Americans can be inappropriate because a major assumption of the Afrocentric paradigm is that social science theories are derived from the specific experiences and cultural perspectives of the theorists. Unlike the predominant Eurocentric ideal, the theorist, from an Afrocentric standpoint, is not viewed as an objective, detached observer but as an observer shaped by a particular cultural, autobiographical, and political standpoint” (p.285). Moreover, Afrocentrists believe that more than one theory or paradigm can be effective in explaining variations among cultures (Schiele, 1996).

## **A Case for Photovoice**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been utilized by a variety of disciplines to amplify the “voices” of those who have seldom been heard, particularly marginalized and oppressed populations. Basic tenets of PAR include the following: (1) a collective approach to investigate an issue or problem; (2) engagement in self-and collective reflection to better understand a problem or issue; (3) a mutual decision to take individual or collective action targeted at addressing the issue or problem; (4) alliance building between participant and researcher during each phase of the research process (McIntyre, 2008). Photovoice is a qualitative, community-based participatory action research methodology that is both culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive for research with African Americans.

Photovoice has three primary objectives including: (1) representation of everyday realities experienced by individuals; (2) promote critical dialogue about individual and community strengths and concerns, (3) to reach policy makers (Wang, 2006). In regards to research participants, photovoice allows them to communicate through photographs about a research topic. Study participants are typically given cameras and asked to take pictures in their schools, home, or community related to the topic of interest. This technique allows those with the least access to creating images, meaning, and knowledge an avenue through which to inform the broader society. Photovoice is consistent with the Afrocentric Paradigm and the Social Constructivist Perspective because of its emphasis on enabling oppressed populations to define reality for themselves.

Various researchers have utilized photovoice with women, impoverished adolescents, people of color and other marginalized groups (Dixon & Hadjialexiou, 2005; Mamary, McCright, & Roe, 2007; Molloy, 2007; Wang, 2006; Zendov & Harmon, 2009). Wang (2006) implemented photovoice to generate photographs and promote dialogue among urban teens about their experiences and perceptions of the causes and solutions to violence in their communities. Dixon and Hadjialexiou (2005) examined health promotion and related health needs of homeless youth through photovoice. Mamary, McCright, and Roe (2007) explored sexual health issues among African American men using this technique. Others have applied the use of photovoice as an advocacy and empowerment tool for social workers involved in social justice (Molloy, 2007). Researchers in the field of education have also used this technique to help students and teachers understand the points of view of urban youth and to engage in writing activities (Zendov & Harmon, 2009). Harley (2011) utilized photovoice to explore hope and hopelessness among low-income African American adolescents.

## **Implementing Photovoice Methodology**

Researchers intending to utilize photovoice methodology with oppressed populations should first consider the costs associated with this type of project. There are several expenses related to purchasing cameras (disposable), film processing, and transcribing data for analysis. Wang (2006) offers the following nine-steps for developing a photovoice project:

- Decide on the focus of the social issue or construct to be examined by research participants. Social issues or concerns may include access to health care, community violence, barriers to accessing community resources etc.
- Identify a group of participants (7-10 people) willing to discuss a social problem or issue. Ask the group to identify a primary audience of policy makers, key stakeholders or community leaders that have some power to impact key issues.
- Inform key stakeholders of their role in the photovoice process. These individuals serve as catalyst for change, based on recommendations from the photovoice participants.
- Obtain informed consent *and meet all institutional review board requirements.*

- Facilitate a discussion regarding photovoice ethics with research participants. Issues concerning safety should be emphasized, especially among youth (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). The researcher must point out potential dangers such as attempting to photograph illegal activities. Research participants should be provided a verbal script to obtain verbal consent from potential subjects' to be photographed (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Other issues that need to be addressed by the researcher include, acceptable ways to approach potential subjects' to take their picture and taking pictures of people without their knowledge and acquiring a photograph release consent (Wang, 2006).
- Distribute cameras and provide basic photography instruction.
- Provide a timeframe for participants to take pictures and return cameras. Participants are typically given one to two weeks to return cameras.

Discuss with research participants their photographs and identify themes. The three step process includes selecting photographs, storytelling, and codifying themes. Participants select their two most significant photographs and tell a story about the picture using the following questions:

- What do you see here?
  - What is really happening here?
  - How does this relate to our lives?
  - Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
  - What can we do about it?
- Plan a gallery showing to display research participants' photographs. Facilitate a discussion between key stakeholders and research participants regarding social issue or concern.

## **Implications**

Social science researchers must understand the cultural and environmental context of research participants. Researchers must also allow marginalized and oppressed groups to be experts of their own lives. Researchers should move beyond adapting traditional theoretical models to "fit" diverse populations. Theoretical models grounded and developed with diverse groups may reduce cultural barriers between participant and researcher. For example, Afrocentric theoretical models account for "collectivity", and collective experiences that shape individuals perceptions (Schiele, 1996). Community problems such as violence and negative behaviors of others often have a global effect on individuals residing in the same neighborhood. Photovoice methodology allows for a collective "voice" to help resolve such issues. Afrocentric models account for spirituality and acknowledge subjective feelings as being valid.

Photovoice is congruent with basic tenets of the Afrocentric Paradigm, it seeks to understand the perspectives of others and validates subjective feelings. Instead of solely adapting theoretical models to fit populations of color, social scientist should consider including models that are culturally relevant and offer a “ground-up” approach to understanding certain phenomenon among diverse groups of people.

## Conclusion

This article provided basic tenets for the Afrocentric Paradigm and photovoice methodology. Photovoice serves as a powerful tool for exploring the perceptions and experiences of historically marginalized populations. Photovoice provides an opportunity for those that have been seldom heard with a “voice” to share their concerns and solutions to community problems from a cultural and contextual standpoint. Researchers utilizing photovoice have a unique opportunity to co-construct knowledge with research participants.

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