
Unpacking the Layers of Community Engagement, Participation, and Knowledge Co-Creation when Representing the Visual Voices of LGBTQ Former Foster Youth

Moshoula Capous-Desyllas, Sarah E. Mountz, Althea Pestine-Stevens

ABSTRACT This article highlights the various ways in which we represented the visual voices of LGBTQ former foster youth through photovoice methodology in order to engage various stakeholders, diverse communities, and the participants themselves. We locate our research within other similar community-based, participatory projects and weave in our collective experiences. Through the juxtaposition of academic literature with the various steps of our research process, this article provides our critical reflections of our engagement process as we prepared for the research, interacted with the community, shared our findings, and incorporated social change efforts through the dissemination of the visual data in various formal and informal spaces.

KEYWORDS LGBTQ foster youth, photovoice, community-based participatory research, engagement, social justice

Locating Ourselves and our Theoretical Framework

Our intersecting identities, feminist values, and commitment to social justice inform our theoretical framework and methodological approach. This community-based research project was inspired by various theoretical perspectives including intersectionality, queer theory, and feminist theories. An intersectional theoretical lens, articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), takes into account the ways in which overlapping social identities inform individual and collective experiences of privilege and oppression at the individual, social, and structural level.

Intersectionality centered our attention to the ways in which the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer former foster youth in this study experienced individual and systemic oppression, based on converging identities along the lines of race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, ability, and citizenship status.

Queer theory serves to challenge hegemonic discourses and binaries around gender and sexual orientation (Gunn & McAllister, 2013). A queer theoretical lens maintains that identities are fluid, embodied, socially constructed, and performed (Butler, 1990). Queer theory informed our view of LGBTQ former foster youth as being impacted by the effects of hegemonic heteronormativity and cisgenderism within various social systems and institutions.

Feminist theories, while diverse and multifaceted, share commonalities that serve as a framework for challenging patriarchal assumptions about the construction of gender and

gender roles (Renzetti, 2010). Feminist theories center the voices of women and marginalized groups, while attending to issues of power, language, difference, diversity, human agency, self-determination, and connecting the personal experience to a political agenda for equality and social change. Feminist theories provided the platform from which to center the voices of the LGBTQ former foster youth and attend to their lived experiences.

Our process: Locating

Locating ourselves within this research study serves to provide a deeper understanding for why we chose to engage in arts-based approaches to research that lend themselves to praxis, emancipation and transformation. Collectively, our research team embodies diverse intersecting identities and diverse connections *to* and experiences *with* the child welfare community and the LGBTQ community as members and allies. We all have professional training and practice experience in the field of social work as practitioners, professors and graduate students. We are all dedicated to making a difference in the lives of others through community-engaged research and arts-based approaches to co-creating knowledge. Our experience with activism within the community and academia served to inspire us to engage in a photovoice project that would center the voices and participation of LGBTQ former foster youth as well as the broader community. Our desire to democratize knowledge creation and consumption while engaging key stake holders in the community provided the foundation for embarking in a community-based participatory research project through photovoice methodology.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Photovoice

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach to research that focuses on involving people who are affected by a problem in the development of solutions. This is done through “collaborative research, planned action, along with process and outcome evaluation” (Shalowitz et al., 2009, p. 350). Photovoice is an art-based research method within the CBPR orientation that uses photography as a way to provide voice and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing individuals’ experiences and expertise. Participants obtain the power to represent their lived experiences through the act of taking pictures. These photographs are then shared within the community beyond academia in order to promote social change. CBPR in general, and photovoice in particular, have been used to engage vulnerable communities, including Indigenous peoples (Flicker et al., 2014), people in developing countries (Atalay, 2010), marginalized groups (Windsor et al., 2014; Minkler, 2005) sex workers (Capous-Desyllas, 2014), persons with HIV/AIDS (Pinto et al., 2011; McKay et al., 2007), and various youth communities perceived to be “at risk” (Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Gomez et al., 2014; Rice, Girvin, & Primak, 2014). Working with a particularly stigmatized population in ways that encourage self-representation can help to raise community awareness, create knowledge, and generate art, all of which can be used for action planning and advocacy in the community.

Photovoice with LGBTQ Former Foster Youth

Photovoice can be a particularly empowering research method to use with LGBTQ-identified former foster youth because of the power disparities they face within the foster care system, which may make them unwilling to share in more traditional research practices, and because the child welfare system does an inadequate job of cultivating spaces for their voices to be heard (Mountz, 2011). Foster youth are particularly vulnerable to challenges with mental and physical health, placement stability, and long-term life trajectory due to the stressors that they have experienced, including family violence, poverty, and neighborhood crime (Rice et al., 2014). Youth who are street-involved and also identify as foster youth can potentially be harmed by participating in traditional research, because such participation can attract negative attention or cause them to neglect tasks necessary for their survival (Conrad & Kendal, 2009). On the other hand, expression via arts can provide these youth with an opportunity to build relationships, trust, and a sense of family. Arts-based research can serve as a “vehicle to connect with youth and for youth to explore and express their experiences and understandings of world around them, in ways that accommodate them emotionally, physically and psychically; the arts also accommodate their often turbulent lifestyles” (Conrad & Kendal, 2009, p. 258). Thus, arts-based research methods such as photovoice can empower youth to share things that they may have found difficult to share through other means. Using critical consciousness raising research methods, such as CBPR with photovoice methodology, can serve to empower marginalized communities. Giving community members a camera to represent themselves and their communities serves to shift the power dynamics, acknowledges community members’ contributions to the research process, and provides a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the complex realities of their lives (Capous-Desyllas, 2014).

Preparing for the Research and Laying the Groundwork

Engagement with communities should happen at all stages of the CBPR and photovoice research process. Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker (1998) provide lessons learned from conducting community-engaged research that can lead to benefiting the participants either directly through an intervention, or through the actions and changes that result from the findings of the research. In order to have this impact, community members, organizational representatives, and researchers collaborate equitably in the processes of generation of knowledge in all components of the research process. Key principles of community-based research are outlined by Israel and colleagues (1998, pp. 178-180) as the following:

- 1) Recognizing community as a unit of identity;
- 2) Building on strengths and resources within the community;
- 3) Facilitating collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research;
- 4) Integrating knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners;
- 5) Promoting a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities;
- 6) Involving a cyclical and iterative process;

- 7) Addressing health from both positive and ecological perspectives; and
- 8) Disseminating findings and knowledge gained to all participants.

Photovoice can engage and empower participants and communities throughout its processes (Brazg et al., 2011; Conrad & Kendal, 2009). Through art-making, participants can be empowered to “reflect upon their life experiences, interrogate the social context of their lives, and plant the seeds for personal and social action” (Conrad & Kendal, 2009, p. 251). Such engagement processes can be fertile ground for reshaping and reclaiming the narratives that are often imposed upon marginalized youth communities. Involving youth in all phases of the research is ideal: “rather than exploiting youth as informants, research can engage them in producing knowledge and working for change to benefit themselves and other youth” (Conrad & Kendal, 2009, p. 255).

Participants and communities are frequently engaged in the preparations for research through serving on Community Advisory Boards (CABs), designing the study, and recruiting participants (Pinto et al., 2011; Windsor et al., 2014; Atalay, 2010; Minkler, 2005; McKay et al., 2007). Rogerio Pinto (2011) noted that Community Advisory Boards (CAB) have their origins in LGBTQ community activism and arose from queer activists’ response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the face of the profound and immoral negligence of scientific and public health establishments to respond to a medical crisis that was brutally killing massive numbers of queer and transgender people, groups like ACT UP mobilized the community to demand the allocation of resources for research in order to understand the nature and course of the epidemic. CABs are utilized as substantive collaborators, not just advisors to the research procedures. Such collaboration can be achieved by taking steps to ensure members are engaged, their relationships are developed, information is exchanged, decision-making is shared, members are retained, and the CAB is maintained. Trust-building, shared risk-taking and honest and open communication regarding clarification of ideas enhances the quality of the relationships of the CAB members (McKay et al., 2007). Forming community partnerships in the form of CABs and involving the participants in all phases of the research process serves to ensure accountability to the community, as well as co-ownership of the research project.

Our process: Preparing

The community was engaged as a stakeholder in the research planning process primarily through a Community Advisory Board (CAB). The CAB consisted of six members; two CAB members were LGBTQ former foster youth, and four CAB members were practitioners with significant experience working with LGBTQ youth who were involved in the child welfare system and/or were homeless. The CAB was multiracial, multilingual, and members all held queer and/or trans identities. CAB members were recruited either because they were known to the research team, or because they had been recommended through people known to the research team. The CAB met on a bimonthly basis for two to three hours each time. Because Los Angeles (LA) is vast and sprawling, and because CAB and research team members worked and resided in different parts of the county, meetings rotated between the university, located in

the more northern San Fernando Valley, and an LGBTQ center in central Los Angeles, where several of the CAB members worked. CAB members were given a small stipend from the research grant money to cover travel expenses, and meals were provided during CAB meetings.

Although the Community Advisory Board assisted with every stage of the research process, they were most notably instrumental in the preparation stages of the research. In this capacity, they served several functions. First, the CAB helped in creating a name for the research study that they felt captured the spirit of the research, made it clear to prospective participants that it was them with whom we wanted to speak, and that we honored the way participants may wish to think of themselves as a community. The CAB additionally helped by reviewing and revising both recruitment materials and research instruments, including the interview guide and photovoice prompts. Specifically, CAB members gave considerable input in phrasing questions in a way that would not make participants feel stigmatized in sensitive areas of inquiry, such as their experiences of homelessness, self-harm, or engagement in sex work. CAB members additionally took care in helping us to select language that elicited information about a full range of experiences associated with a phenomenon (e.g., rather than simply asking if participants had ever been homeless, asking if participants had ever couch-surfed, slept in cars, and so forth). Finally, prior to engaging participants in the research process, CAB members helped us trouble shoot ethical considerations that might arise and ways in which we could be responsive. Specifically, they helped us develop a system as a team for making determinations about the need to file child protective service (CPS) reports in cases of participant disclosures about previous experiences of child abuse, given our role as social workers with mandated reporting responsibilities. This was an especially tricky issue to negotiate due to our dual roles as researchers and social workers, and our strong desire to maintain integrity in our relationships with participants. Additionally, CAB members with clinical backgrounds offered themselves as resources for participants who wished to debrief with an anonymous person following the interview, since participants would likely be discussing difficult memories from the past in the course of the interview.

Engaging with Participants, the Community, and Various Key Stakeholders

In CBPR, communities are ideally engaged in data collection and analysis. In arts-based research, such as photovoice, participants may also be involved in the art exhibition of the raw data, such as photographs. Involving the participants and communities in the data collection and analysis process improves the quality of the research in the following ways: the researchers gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants, the ways that social systems have failed them, more sensitive topics, and more accurate/richer data codes and themes are identified (Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Minkler, 2005), while simultaneously building research capacity and empowering those communities.

By involving participants in data collection and analysis, participants learn and employ the research methods (Brazg et al., 2011; Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Minkler, 2005). Participants may in fact code the photovoice data themselves, coming up with the themes for qualitative data analysis (Brazg et al., 2011). In other studies, it may be more appropriate for the academic

researcher to conduct the coding and analysis, inviting the participants to do member checks and decide which photos and descriptions will be presented at exhibitions. Involving participants in this capacity as co-researchers “will allow them to see themselves as agents of change within their social context,” rather than simply as subjects being studied (Conrad & Kendal, 2009, p. 261). In addition to the specific research skills learned, participants can engage in consciousness-raising, capacity building, skills training, work experience, paid employment, leadership development, peer mentoring, and self-advocacy.

Communities can also be engaged in the exhibition of arts-based research. Participants can help with setting up the display or exhibit, debrief and give feedback about their participation, and facilitate community dialogue about the topic (Brazg et al., 2011; Capous-Desyllas, 2014). Exhibits in the community, in locations such as local cafes, public libraries, universities, art galleries, bookstores, and social service agencies, may capture the attention of additional media sources, furthering the reach of participants’ voices to realms such as newspapers and television, while empowering the artists with their freedom of sharing, self-representation, confronting stigma, and the possibility to reinvent themselves (Capous-Desyllas, 2014). Additionally, through the use of new media such as digital productions, youth can share their experiences and have a voice in places that they are usually not heard (Flicker et al., 2008).

Our process: Engaging

Recruiting and interviewing participants. Our research team was made up of faculty and student researchers. They represented members of the LGBTQ community and allies. With the assistance of our CAB members, we engaged in outreach to various social service organizations and tabled at a drop-in center at a large organization in LA. We also reached out to LGBTQ-oriented and foster care alumnae campus groups and centers, list serves, and social media, spreading the word about the purpose of our photovoice project with LGBTQ former foster youth. Through purposive and snowball sampling, we were able to recruit a total of 25 LGBTQ former foster youth who participated in this project. These youth participated in in-depth qualitative interviews, which lasted from one to three hours. Participants were asked questions related to family history, foster care placements and transitioning out of care, educational experiences, mental health, substance abuse, LGBTQ identity and coming out,



Figure 1. Books featuring Artists’ Biographies

resilience, romantic and sexual relationships, mentorship, and systemic change. Of these 25 youth, 18 participated in the photovoice portion of the project where they photographed their experiences before, during, and after foster care. As researchers invested in participant-driven approaches, the youth were given freedom to deviate from these themes and to take photographs of important things in their life. Many chose to do so, taking photographs of their identities, challenges, dreams, and aspirations. To

engage the participants in the power of self-representation, most of the youth wrote the artist-biographies that would accompany their photographs in a community-based art exhibit. The participants who preferred to have one of the researchers write their biography had the opportunity to review how their intersecting identities would be presented in their artist-biography. It was crucial for us to place the power of representation in the hands of the participants. The artist-biographies provided a context for each participant's identity and served to accompany their photographs featured at the exhibit. The artist-biographies were also placed in a book that was distributed during the art exhibits (see Figure 1).



Figure 2. Decision-making process for photos featured in art exhibit¹

Group dialogue session. After the participants shared their lived experiences and photographs through individual interviews, they were invited to partake in a group dialogue session aimed at collectively planning for the community art exhibits. We reserved a conference room next to the gallery space that was allocated for the art exhibit. Having the opportunity to hold a dialogue session with the photovoice participants next to the space where the first art exhibit was held provided the chance for the research team and the participants to serve as curators of the exhibit. To prepare for this, student members of the research team placed each participant's numbered photographs on a poster board and laid them out on the floor of the conference room. This provided the opportunity for each youth and researcher to vote on their favorite numbered photographs to be featured in the community art exhibits (see Figure 2). Although we expected many more participants to attend the group dialogue session, those who showed up were very excited to take part in the planning and decision-making process. The photographs featured in the community-based exhibits were voted on, discussed, and collectively agreed upon.

At the group dialogue session, we also discussed other activities that were important to the participants and the LGBTQ community. As a result of our discussion and brainstorming session, we decided to have food, beverages, live music, a photographer documenting the event, and a Graffiti Board alongside one of the walls of the gallery. This Graffiti Board was created to serve as a place for guests of the exhibit to share their thoughts, emotions, and creative responses to the photographs taken by the LGBTQ foster youth using colored markers, glitter sticks, magazine cut-outs, and other art supplies (see Figures 3, 4, and 5). The Graffiti Board also

¹ Appropriate Institutional Research Ethics Board approval was secured, prior to all data collection, and all participants signed consent forms to release their photographs and any images of themselves for publication.

help



Figure 3. Graffiti Board in action



Figure 4. Graffiti Board artwork

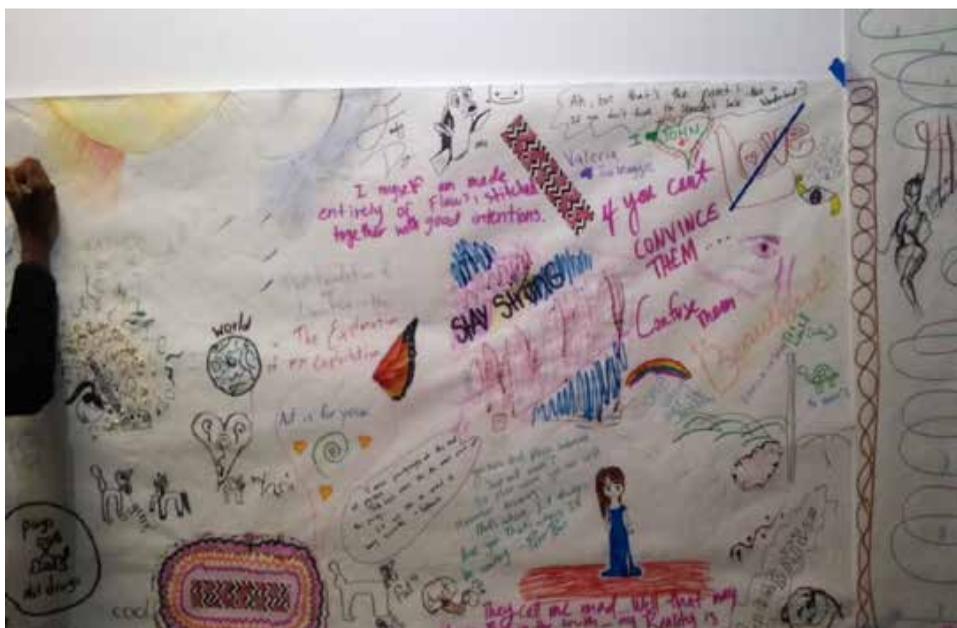


Figure 5. Graffiti Board artwork

Ambassadors Program. As we were preparing for our first gallery show in Downtown Los Angeles, we wanted to more broadly engage with members of the LGBTQ youth community who were not a part of our study. One way in which we did this was through collaborating with the Ambassadors program. The Ambassadors are a group of youth leaders associated with the youth drop-in center at a large organization in LA. They are engaged in community organizing both inside and outside of the Center. We had become acquainted with them through one of our Community Advisory Board members who worked for the drop-in center, where we had recruited many of our study participants. We attended several of the Ambassadors meetings to solicit their input for the planning of the gallery show and invited members of the group to the dialogue planning session (discussed above) that we had with the gallery show participant-artists. All of the Ambassadors had at some point experienced homelessness, and some of them were child welfare involved. We were particularly interested in what they felt their community might view as an enriching event that honored their community. The primary outcome of this collaboration was the youths' assistance in planning an open mic event that was held in a room adjacent to the gallery towards the end of the exhibit's opening night. Ambassadors, participants, and other young people from the community participated in the open mic (see Figure 6). Many shared music and poetry in which they reflected upon their identities as queer and trans youth, their foster care experiences, and their experience of participating in the project and/or attending the exhibit. One of the ambassadors also video-recorded the art exhibit opening. This video footage was used in the interactive website created after the community art exhibit. Since the event was being held in Los Angeles, one

Ambassador felt strongly that there should be a red carpet at the entrance to honor and welcome the youth into the show. Sure enough, there was a red carpet lining the way to the exhibit on the opening night of the show.



Figure 6. Open mic performance during community art exhibit

Gallery shows. Over a period of six months, we held two community-based art exhibits in the Los Angeles area where we featured the visual voices of LGBTQ former foster youth. One of the venues was in a large, well-known gallery space in the downtown area and the other venue was the university's gallery. We selected two diverse spaces to hold the exhibit with the hope of sharing the photographs within and beyond academia. The art exhibit held at the university engaged students, faculty, staff, and others connected to the institution, including social workers and other foster youth. The art exhibit held downtown expanded the audience to include various stakeholders. In addition to the participants and their friends, the individuals who attended the exhibit's opening night included members of the general public, artists, social workers, policymakers in the field of child welfare, advocates, mental health specialists, foster youth (including an entire group home and their line staff), outreach workers, program directors, and other critical players with institutional power to create change. The atmosphere that we tried to cultivate at each exhibit was one of acceptance, celebration, connection, community-building, and creative self-expression. As a means to engage with the guests of the exhibit, we had a book (in the form of a diary) where they could write down their thoughts about the exhibit and share their heightened sense of consciousness around important issues (see Figure 7). This book of guest reflections was shared with the project participants after

the exhibits and used to engage them in dialogue about the importance of their photographs. Having a collection of personal reflections about the art exhibit was useful for gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of the exhibit within the community and how various individuals engaged with the project on a personal level. Over 500 guests attended the two art exhibits combined. Since then, two “mini-exhibits” featuring a portion of the larger body of photos have taken place to celebrate Pride month (June) at a regional office within the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and at the University of Albany, where one of the authors is currently on faculty.

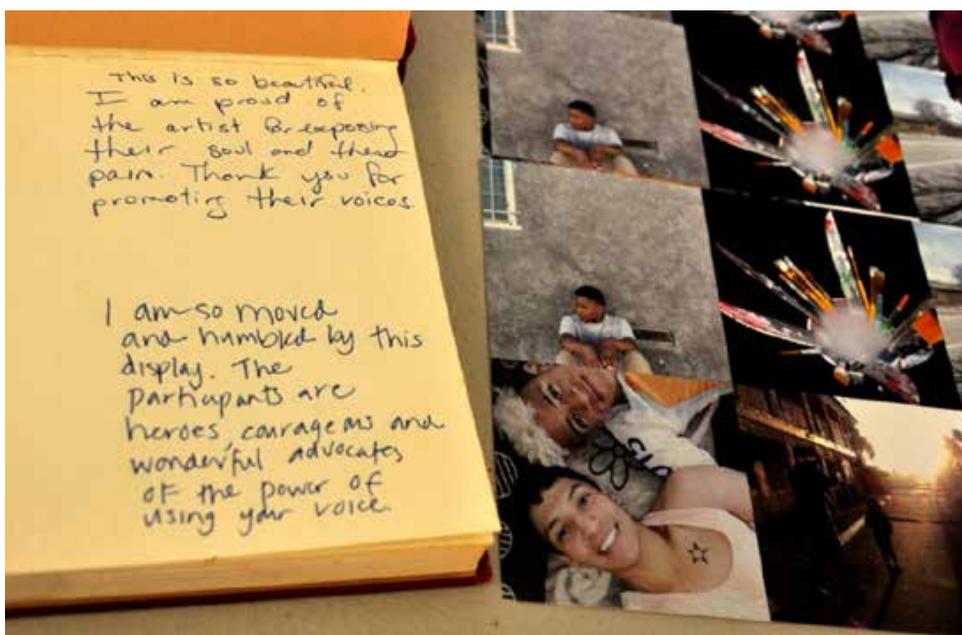


Figure 7. Audience engagement book of reflections about the exhibits

Resilient scholars facilitated dialogue session. In the course of planning for the second exhibit hosted at the university art gallery, we reached out to various departments and programs on campus to invite collaborators and co-sponsors as a means to maximize our outreach and impact on campus. A particularly rewarding collaboration involved the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP), a university organization that houses Resilient Scholars which is a program for students on campus who are current or former foster youth. The Guardian and Resilient Scholars programs are unique to California and are a part of the California College Pathways. Both programs have been heralded as a national model for expanding the accessibility of higher education for current and former foster youth. Upon hearing about the upcoming gallery show, the Resilient Scholars director reached out to us to inform us that group members were interested in having a private viewing of the show before it opened to the general public. We arranged for the gallery to be closed to outside visitors on a weeknight and held a private

tour followed by a dialogue session facilitated by two of the research team members. Resilient Scholars members—some of whom identified as LGBTQ, many of whom did not—were asked to share their reflections about the exhibit. The discussion was facilitated by a Graffiti Board activity in which group members were asked to share thoughts and feelings elicited by the exhibit using words or images. Then, we had a larger group discussion using the Graffiti Board as a jumping off point.

Many participants shared that aspects of the visual stories resonated for them based on their experiences in foster care and/or aging out of foster care, also noting ways in which their experiences might have diverged based upon identity. Several group members noted that the event made them reflect on the importance of having a space like Resilient Scholars in which to commune with others who shared the experience of having been in foster care and attending college, and noted the surrogate family role that the group played in their lives as students. A number of group members also noted that the exhibit represented the first time that they had experienced a campus event organized explicitly to honor and amplify the voices of foster youth. They also shared that they took pride in the event and wanted to tell people about it, bring friends to see it, and to attend the opening of the exhibit that was scheduled to take place a few days later. Many of the former foster youth from the Resilient Scholars participated in the opening, by helping us set up and welcome guests to the event. At least one group member volunteered to be interviewed for a mini-documentary about the project.

Public Broadcasting Services South California Initiative. After our second gallery show, we were contacted by PBS SoCal about a project they were working on, called *To Foster Change*. As a social impact initiative, *To Foster Change* was designed to inspire change and improve life outcomes for foster youth in Southern California.² One aspect of what they do is feature innovative local programming for foster youth. The director of *To Foster Change* contacted one of our collaborators at the Los Angeles LGBTQ Center to learn more about their programming for LGBTQ foster youth, and was referred to us. After being interviewed about our project, *To Foster Change* featured our mini-documentary and a link to our website on their own web platform, drawing broader attention to the project and participants' stories. Thus, through our collaboration with PBS SoCal, we were further able to engage with the community in a broader, less geographically constricted manner, via digital methods and new media.

Website. One of the ways in which we hoped to engage an audience beyond the Los Angeles area was through an interactive website. This consisted of photographs and artist biographies from each participant, a description of the project and the process, and two mini-documentaries featuring our community engagement activities through art exhibits and interviews with participants and guests at the two art exhibits. The website was created to provide a platform for the voices of the LGBTQ foster youth and to raise awareness about important issues in their lives. The creation of a website featuring this photovoice project served to create an

² See <https://www.pbssocal.org/programs/to-foster-change> for more information.

online presence for the LGBTQ foster youth as a means to educate and mobilize support at the local, national, and international levels. Through this medium, the visual voices of the youth were amplified, allowing them to share their lived experiences, as seen through their own lens, with a diverse audience.

Understanding Our Findings

The photographs and captions collected from the 18 LGBTQ former foster youth were analyzed using a systematic process. We began by analyzing the in-depth interview transcripts informed by Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). This process involved asking specific open-ended questions about a topic from the participants' transcripts that were then organized into domains in a consensual manner by our research team (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005). The next step in our process involved coming together as a group to dialogue about the codes that emerged. After extensive discussion, we consensually arrived at eleven general domains: (1) family history; (2) foster care placement history; (3) educational experiences; (4) transitioning out of care; (5) mental health; (6) substance abuse; (7) LGBTQ identity and coming out; (8) mentorship; (9) resilience; (10) systemic change; (11) sexual and romantic relationships. Participants discussed these domains within the context of their experiences before, during, and after foster care.

Our process: Understanding

Themes that emerged in participants' photographs. The photographs taken by the LGBTQ youth were diverse in content and style. Their images included landscapes, cityscapes, buildings, various objects, pets, significant people in their lives, and self-portraits. Many images depicted their dreams for the future, as well as their strength and resilience. After a cross-case analysis of the eleven domains previously mentioned, various areas emerged as significant in the participants' lives including specific photographs that represented their experiences while in foster care and the challenges of transitioning out of foster care. Specifically, many participants shared stories and images of abandonment by their family of origin, compounded by rejection from foster parents and social workers because of their LGBTQ identity. Some photographs symbolically depicted their feelings of dehumanization and voicelessness within the foster care system and the lack of emotional and monetary support and guidance upon exiting care. There were quite a few images that represented the participants' LGBTQ identity and coming out, as well as their process of moving from shame and stigma to empowerment and pride. Many images were taken to depict how the youth overcame barriers in their life related to mental health struggles and substance abuse. The participants also took various photos related to education as an aspiration and a source of resilience.

Portrait of our participants. Collectively, the eighteen LGBTQ youth who participated in this photovoice project embodied diverse identities along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. The youth were between the ages of 18 and 26 years old, with seventeen identifying as youth of color, two identified as trans, one identified as gender fluid, and fifteen

identified as cisgender. Their sexual orientations varied, with two who identified as lesbians, five who identified as gay, five who identified as bisexual, three who identified as queer, one who identified as pansexual, one who identified as straight, and one who identified as non-heterosexual. Of the eighteen participants, two had dropped out of high school, two had completed high school, two had a general education diploma, two were pursuing GEDs, and eleven had some college experience. The participants had experienced anywhere between one to thirty different foster care placements, with an average of seven placements.

Sharing Findings Within and Beyond Academia

The sharing of research findings does not have to be limited to traditional venues such as academic journal publications and conference presentations. Findings and photos shared with the broader community can increase the relevance of an intervention, program, or research study, which can then influence the attitudes of practitioners, advocate for policy, and make the program or intervention more likely to succeed. Without strong input from the community, there is a risk of researchers designing interventions that do not apply to the community (Minkler, 2005, p. 7; Capous-Desyllas, 2014). More specifically, findings about risk and protective factors can be presented at community-wide events, to local groups, such as Parent Teacher Student Association meetings, and to government agencies, such as Youth and Family Services agencies (Brazg et al., 2011). These findings can then be used by these entities to inform the alteration of action plans, ensure effective programs, encourage dialogue, and educate community members (Brazg et al., 2011). Such wide dissemination can mobilize a community to engage in social change on a particular issue. By expanding dissemination of findings beyond academia, a consciousness raising intervention can additionally be aimed at the general public, as was the case with this project.

Our process: Sharing

Academic and Community-Based Conferences. In addition to sharing the research project with various communities through non-traditional means (e.g., art exhibit, website, printed materials), we also presented the findings at five conferences. Three of these conferences were positioned within the social work academic discipline, were national and academic in nature, and comprised an audience of social work researchers and practitioners. The other two were local, community-based conferences that primarily comprised of social work practitioners, outreach workers, activists, policy makers, and other individuals who worked specifically with the LGBTQ community. These last two conferences were also attended by youth and families who are consumers of these services. It was important for us to share the photovoice research project at distinctly different conferences so that we could engage individuals working with LGBTQ foster youth in various capacities, as well as LGBTQ youth and families. At the latter of these two local conferences, there were LGBTQ former foster youth in the audience who provided important insights into their experiences as they related to the findings, thus generating rich dialogue about the research and its application.

Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). One of our most impactful experiences of engagement outside of traditional academic modes of research dissemination was presenting our findings at the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCSF) regional directors' meeting. This meeting was convened by the director of DCFS, and attended by directors of each regional office in the county. The invitation to present at this meeting was facilitated by one of our master of social work students who is a long time employee of DCFS, and who had attended the campus gallery exhibit with her research class. Like many Masters in Social Work (MSW) programs, our university hosts a federally funded title IV-E stipend program that provides financial support to MSW students committed to working in the field of public child welfare. This program draws many seasoned child welfare employees. One such student came to the exhibit with a mature working knowledge of the child welfare system and left feeling moved by the participants' visual stories and with a strong conviction that the testimonies of alumni of the Los Angeles County foster care system ought to be shared with employees of the system itself. This was anxiety producing, as many of the participants were critical of DCFS and their stories often did not reflect positively on the system. However, we were also able to share testimonies of youth who noted the transformative impact of authentically caring and affirming workers who made a difference through practices such as correctly using their asserted gender pronouns. This modeling of affirming practice through youth testimony, paralleled by the raw and inescapable feelings of LGBTQ foster care alumni who felt ill prepared for the transition to adulthood and/or re-traumatized by their experiences in foster care, elicited what felt like heartfelt inquiry by many in attendance about ways they could do better. Although certainly not everyone in attendance was on board, and there were some linguistic shortcomings that emerged in referring to our participant community, we received several follow up inquiries from individuals seeking more information following the presentation.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

The images and voices of LGBTQ former foster youth in this study hold several implications for practice, policy and research. From a practice perspective, the use of photography allows LGBTQ foster youth to identify and creatively represent their lived experiences, challenges in life, and sources of resilience, thus informing social service design and delivery. Photovoice methodology provides an opportunity to engage the participants and various stakeholders throughout the research process through public sharing of the findings. This process has the potential to bring together individuals and empower communities to work for long-term social change. Visual images can serve to educate and influence social workers, activists, academics, and other influential community advocates working on foster care issues as they relate to LGBTQ foster youth. Dissemination of photovoice findings through various avenues of communication allows for individual and collective engagement beyond academia. Specifically, our aim throughout the project has been to engage in public consciousness-raising that will heighten the visibility of, and generate a public ethic of care and concern for, the experiences LGBTQ youth within and beyond foster care.

Practice

LGBTQ foster youth should have a central role in the design and delivery of social services. Photovoice supports participant-driven identification and determination of appropriate social service needs. The participatory aspects of photovoice provide social workers, diverse mental health professionals, and outreach workers with collaborative tools to include the perspectives of LGBTQ foster youth. The youths' perspectives "may lead to culturally appropriate solutions because participants are involved in the collection, interpretation and dissemination of the findings" (Valera, Gallin, Schuk, & Davis, 2009, p. 312). Photographs provide visual data from the homes, streets, schools, community centers, workplaces, and other spaces where LGBTQ youth spend their time. This lends itself to a more culturally appropriate understanding of social services needs and potentially more innovative service designed to meet and deliver those needs. Photographs form visual evidence to facilitate the prioritization of issues identified by LGBTQ former foster youth and to support their advocacy endeavors.

Policy

Photovoice art exhibits that involve the engagement of various stakeholders in the research process have the power to influence local and state organizations and policies. Through the visual representations of the needs expressed by LGBTQ former foster youth, more attention can be placed on specific needs, particularly those expressed by queer, transgender, and nonbinary youth of color whose intersecting experiences of racism, transphobia, homophobia, and adultism are often underexplored. Several participants in this project expressed the importance of having social workers who were affirming of their sexual orientation and gender identity, and the detrimental impact of workers and organizations that lacked competency and knowledge about appropriate services and resources for this community. Visual representations of the lives and nuanced experiences of LGBTQ youth in the foster care system have the power to provide individuals with a new consciousness of what actions to take and how to proceed with creating organizational transformation and policy changes.

Direct actions, such as implementing worker trainings, can impact the culture of an organization that works with youth and their ability to provide appropriate resources and care from the perspectives of the youth. For example, placing LGBTQ youth in residential spaces that are congruent with their own identity or experience of their gender is critical to their health and well-being. Expanding the scope of foster parents who identify as LGBTQ can contribute to placements that are more appropriate and affirming for foster youth. Ensuring that policies support various aspects of medical transition, such as safe access to hormone blockers and/or gender affirming hormones, is vital to the physical and emotional well-being of trans and nonbinary youth desiring medical transition.

Research

Incorporating the arts in community-based research serves to counter the dominant forms of representation produced within the social sciences. Photovoice data supports the use of art to deepen meaning, expand awareness, and enlarge understanding of lived experiences

of LGBTQ former foster youth. Creative forms of data representation promise to increase the variety of questions that we ask about the phenomena we study since they present new ways of seeing and new settings for their display. Exhibits, websites, facilitated community dialogues, and other forms of engagement in the community featuring art by LGBTQ former foster youth can serve to educate the public and share research beyond academia, taking it to diverse groups of people and different communities. Photovoice projects can foster relationships between researchers and community members while building capacity within the community. Photographic representations of LGBTQ former foster youths' diverse lives and multiple realities can serve to challenge stigma and assumptions about their needs and work towards enhancing visibility and awareness related to their intersectional experiences and needs holistically.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank the California Humanities grant, the CSUN College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, the University at Albany School of Social Welfare, our Community Advisory Board Members, our graduate student researchers, the various communities who supported our art exhibits, and all of the participants who shared their stories and visions for social justice.

About the Authors

Moshoula Capous-Desyllas (*corresponding author*) is an associate professor in the sociology department at California State University Northridge. Her areas of interest and expertise are in arts-based and anti-oppressive approaches to research. She has engaged in numerous photovoice projects with marginalized populations, including collaboration with individuals working in the sex industry, LGBTQ youth who experience bullying, LGBTQ foster youth, participants of gay rodeo, and grandparents as unexpected caregivers. Her passion lies in utilizing the arts as a form of activism for social justice and change. Email: moshoula@csun.edu

Sarah Mountz is an assistant professor of social work at University at Albany, SUNY. Her previous research focused on the experiences of LGBTQ youth and young adults who had been incarcerated in girls facilities in the juvenile justice system in New York. She worked in various aspects of the child welfare system in New York City between 2001 and 2006, including with LGBTQ youth in congregate foster care. Sarah is especially interested in youth organizing and activism and social justice in social work education. Her current work focuses on issues of educational justice and educational access among youth in foster care. Email: smountz@albany.edu

Althea Pestine-Stevens is a PhD student in the School of Social Welfare at the State University of New York at Albany. Her background includes researching and evaluating projects related to kinship families and trauma-informed care in residential treatment centers for youth. Her current research focuses on creating Age-Friendly Communities through collective action.

References

- Atalay, S. (2010). ‘We don’t talk about Çatalhöyük, we live it’: Sustainable archaeological practice through community-based participatory research. *World Archaeology*, 42(3), 418–429.
- Brazg, T., Bekemeier, B., Spigner, C., & Huebner, C. E. (2011). Our community in focus: The use of photovoice for youth-driven substance abuse assessment and health promotion. *Health Promotion Practice*, 12(4), 502–511.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Thinking Gender Series). London, UK: Routledge.
- Capous-Desyllas, M. (2014). Using photovoice with sex workers: The power of art, agency and resistance. *Qualitative Social Work*, 13(4), 477–501.
- Conrad, D., & Kendal, W. (2009). Making space for youth: Human Youth Society and arts-based participatory research with street-involved youth in Canada. In *Education, Participatory Action Research, and Social Change* (pp. 251–264). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Vol. 1989, Article 8.
- Flicker, S., Travers, R., Guta, A., McDonald, S., & Meagher, A. (2007). Ethical dilemmas in community-based participatory research: Recommendations for institutional review boards. *Journal of Urban Health*, 84(4), 478–493.
- Flicker, S., Maley, O., Ridgley, A., Biscope, S., Lombardo, C., & Skinner, H. A. (2008). Using technology and participatory action research to engage youth in health promotion. *Action Research*, 6(3), 285–303.
- Flicker, S., Danforth, J. Y., Wilson, C., Oliver, V., Larkin, J., Restoule, J. P., & Prentice, T. (2014). “Because we have really unique art”: Decolonizing research with Indigenous youth using the arts. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 10(1), 16–34.
- Gomez, R. J., Ryan, T. N., Norton, C. L., Jones, C., & Galán-Cisneros, P. (2015). Perceptions of learned helplessness among emerging adults aging out of foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 32(6), 507–516.
- Gunn, V., and McAllister, C. (2013). Methods on the margins? Queer theory as method in higher education research. In J. Huisman & M. Tight (Eds.) *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research* (International Perspectives on Higher Education Research, Volume 9) Emerald Group, pp.155–174.
- Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., and Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 196–205.

-
- Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual Review of Public Health, 19*(1), 173–202.
- McKay, M. M., Hibbert, R., Lawrence, R., Miranda, A., Paikoff, R., Bell, C. C., Madison-Boyd, S., Baptiste, D., Coleman, D., Pinto, R.M., & Bannon Jr, W. M. (2007). Creating mechanisms for meaningful collaboration between members of urban communities and university-based HIV prevention researchers. *Social Work in Mental Health, 5*(1–2), 147–168.
- Minkler, M. (2005). Community-based research partnerships: challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Urban Health, 82*(2), ii3–ii12.
- Mountz, S. (2011). Revolving doors: LGBTQ youth at the interface of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. *LGBTQ Policy Journal at the Harvard Kennedy School, 1*, 29–45.
- Pinto, R. M., Spector, A. Y., & Valera, P. A. (2011). Exploring group dynamics for integrating scientific and experiential knowledge in Community Advisory Boards for HIV research. *AIDS Care, 23*(8), 1006–1013.
- Renzetti, C. M. (2010). *Feminist theories: Oxford bibliographies online research guide*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rice, K., Girvin, H., & Primak, S. (2014). Engaging adolescent youth in foster care through photography. *Child Care in Practice, 20*(1), 37–47.
- Shalowitz, M. U., Isacco, A., Barquin, N., Clark-Kauffman, E., Delger, P., Nelson, D., & Wagenaar, K. A. (2009). Community-based participatory research: a review of the literature with strategies for community engagement. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 30*(4), 350–361.
- Wagaman, M. A. (2015). Changing ourselves, changing the world: Assessing the value of participatory action research as an empowerment-based research and service approach with LGBTQ young people. *Child & Youth Services, 36*(2), 124–149.
- Windsor, L., Pinto, R. M., Benoit, E., Jessell, L., & Jemal, A. (2014). Community wise: The development of an anti-oppression model to promote individual and community health. *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions, 14*(4), 402–420.