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Through Their Eyes: Using Photography with Youth Who Experienced Trauma

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Abstract

Adolescent youth in foster care are often exposed to multiple traumas and often leave the child welfare system without processing thoughts, feelings, or plans for the future. This study employed photo elicitation with a group of adolescent youth in foster care to discover what is important to them. Eight themes emerged. Family and friends, or the need to have someone who is always there for them was the most frequent theme photographed. Utilizing photo elicitation with youth who have been abused and/or neglected is an engaging and empowering method as it allows for individualized case planning that is guided by the wants and needs of the youth themselves.

Keywords

Photo Elicitation, Trauma, Child Welfare, Adolescents, Foster Care, Content Analysis

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Through Their Eyes: Using Photography with Youth Who Experienced Trauma

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Adolescent youth in foster care are often exposed to multiple traumas and often leave the child welfare system without processing thoughts, feelings, or plans for the future. This study employed photo elicitation with a group of adolescent youth in foster care to discover what is important to them. Eight themes emerged. Family and friends, or the need to have someone who is always there for them was the most frequent theme photographed. Utilizing photo elicitation with youth who have been abused and/or neglected is an engaging and empowering method as it allows for individualized case planning that is guided by the wants and needs of the youth themselves. Keywords: Photo Elicitation, Trauma, Child Welfare, Adolescents, Foster Care, Content Analysis

By the time most children enter the child welfare system, they have already been exposed to a wide range of painful and distressing experiences, many of which remain unknown and unreported during intake (Harpaz-Rotem, Berkowitz, Marans, Murphy, & Rosenheck, 2008), which involves assessing allegations of abuse and/or neglect. These traumatic stressors include family violence, poverty, and neighborhood crime, and may have both short-and long-term consequences for the child's mental health, physical health, and life trajectory (Ethier, Lemelin, & Lacharite, 2004; Harpaz-Rotem et al., 2008; Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, 2008). Time, energy, and resources are put into finding a permanent placement, either reunification or adoption, for these youth. However, as these youth become adolescents in care, there is an abrupt change in their permanent plans, to "successfully" age out of the system, which means achieving self-sufficiency and independence. Unfortunately, there has not been preparatory services put into place (Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, 2008), and the system and providers scramble to prepare these adolescents to live entirely on their own with no familial or societal support.

Photo elicitation is a qualitative research methodology that engages participants in taking photographs that are used in interviews to facilitate discussion (Rose, 2007). Photos can carry or evoke information, affect, and reflection. This strategy allows participants to reflect on aspects of their lives that they typically do not consider and may be used to facilitate discussion of sensitive topics (Rose, 2007). According to Rose (2007), the photo elicitation process comprises six steps. An initial interview is conducted with participants, focusing on questions that guide the intended research. A camera is then given to each participant, with guidelines for how to use the camera, an overview of interview topics or prompts, and a specified number of photographs to be taken. Typically, photos are then developed and participants are asked to write something about the photos that were taken. Blinn and Harrist (1991) suggest that each participant be provided with paper for notes so that she or he can provide a title, description of each photo, and description of thoughts and feelings each photo evokes after each photo is taken. After photographs are taken, the researcher interviews the participants to discuss photos with them in detail. This step is vital in clarifying the meaning of the photographs to the participants. The narrative remarks written by the participant provide important information that is also discussed during the interview. The benefits of photo elicitation are that it provides detailed information about

how participants see their world and allows participants to reflect on things they may not usually contemplate (Rose, 2007).

Photo elicitation is often used with youth as it is a method to extract their feelings and experiences in a way that empowers them (Sontag, 1973). Adolescence is a time of identity development, exploration, and clarification. Teens are engaged in making sense of the world around them and finding their place in it (Goessling & Doyle, 2009). Photos can serve as an externalized medium for the expression of youths' personal issues and can have a positive effect on their health and enhanced outcomes include increasing self-esteem, instilling hope, and assisting with personal and interpersonal development (Goessling & Doyle, 2009; Trainin Blank, 2009). Youth who have experienced multiple traumas may obtain specific benefits through photo elicitation, including helping them to work through unconscious material, identify unresolved trauma, gain new perspectives on enduring problems, or gain valuable insights (Trainin Blank, 2009). The purpose of this study is to provide adolescent youth who must negotiate normal developmental processes, as well as additional traumas caused by family disruption, multiple placements in foster care, and loss, with an avenue to express what is important to them.

Literature Review

Five qualitative research articles were examined for the purpose of this literature review, all of which described results of qualitative research studies focused on youth in which the researchers utilized a visual methodology. Photo elicitation is utilized in various forms to collect data. Photovoice, also known as community photography, utilizes photography as a means of empowering participants to reveal topics of concern and promote social action (Goessling & Doyle, 2009). Photo novella uses photography to tell a story (Berman, Ford-Bilboe, Moutrey, & Cekic, 2001). Researchers can approach photo elicitation from various directions including asking participants to take photos or presenting photos that already exist to elicit discussion (Cameron, Lau, & Tapanya, 2009; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006). Two broad themes emerged across a review of the five articles: youths' perception of what matters and benefits of using photo elicitation. Despite differences in terminology used across the studies reviewed, photo elicitation is the term chosen to describe the visual methodology employed in this study.

Youths' Perceptions of What Matters

Goessling and Doyle (2009) utilized photovoice in a participatory action research project, *Thru the Lenz*. Research participants were youth under the age of 18 enrolled in an urban high school and involved in an at-risk intervention program. The youth were asked to take photos at home, in the community, and at school to inform others about their lives and communities. Based on an analysis of the one to three photos selected by the youth, several reoccurring themes emerged including family, friends, pets, and awareness of surroundings.

In a 2001 study on the impact of war on Bosnian youth, Berman et al. (2001) examined the use of photo novella as a methodology for data collection. Seven Bosnian youth were provided with disposable cameras and instructed to take photos of people, places, and things that were important to them. Youth were refugees in Canada between the ages of 11 and 14. Themes of war, family, and hopes and dreams resulted from the photos and discussions. A difference in the type of pictures taken was noticed between males and females. Female participants were more likely to take photos representing their experiences in Bosnia, whereas male participants took photos depicting their lives in the present (Berman

et al., 2001). All youth voiced evidence of strength, courage, and resilience in their discussions of the photos and experiences.

Cameron et al. (2009) utilized photo elicitation to explore the resiliency of youth in diverse communities. Similar to Berman et al. (2001), Cameron and colleagues asked four youth to take photos of people, places, and things that were important to them as one part of the study. A family theme emerged from the analysis of the photos taken by the youth.

Morrow (2001) used visual methodologies to study youths' perspectives of their environment and the impact of their environment on their well-being. Cameras were distributed to youth between the ages of 14 and 15 who were asked to photograph places that were important to them and provide descriptions of why those places were important. Themes of friendship, neighborhood space, public parks, and urban spaces emerged. In particular, proximity to friends seemed to be of importance to the youth. Feelings of exclusion were narrated as youth were prohibited from utilizing some public spaces; however, some public spaces promoted social interactions among youth and were described favorably.

Benefits of Using Photo Elicitation

The studies outlined above also highlighted the benefits of using visual methodologies with youth. In the study by Goessling and Doyle (2009), photovoice was the medium used to empower at-risk youth to share their life with members of their community. Similarly, Berman et al. (2001) concluded that photo novella allowed participants to discuss issues that may have been difficult to share through other mediums.

Photo elicitation may also decrease the anxiety youth experience when interviewed by an adult. For example, Epstein et al. (2006) reported photo elicitation not only fostered youth involved in their study to be more comfortable during the interview process but empowered them to take the lead in the discussion of the photos presented to them. The use of photography actively engages youth and provides them with the opportunity to consider their surroundings and the impact of the environment on their lives (Morrow, 2001).

All studies examined above utilized photo elicitation with youth who have experienced some form of trauma (e.g., illness, war). Having youth photograph those things that are important to them allows them to express their experiences, feelings, and preferences (Rose, 2007) in an empowering, non-threatening manner. Utilizing another population of youth who have experienced a different type of trauma, the following research question is explored in this study: What do adolescent youth in foster care identify as being important to them?

The first and third authors previously worked in child welfare and over the years witnessed the devastating effects foster care has on the child. At one point in her career, Dr. Rice worked with adolescents in foster care and witnessed the lack of attention and resources available to meet their myriad needs related to trauma and normal development. Many of the adolescents were "aging out" of foster care; exiting care when they turned 18 without a permanent place to reside or resources in place to survive on their own.

Drs. Rice and Girvin are actively involved with the local child welfare agency and are on the board of the local Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. CASA staff conduct independent needs assessments of youth in foster care. Information gathered is used by CASA staff to advocate for youth in court hearings. CASA staff reported some difficulty related to the unwillingness of youth to share personal information with them during traditional interviews. TTE emerged from this challenge. Partnering with a graduate student, Ms. Primak, whose background is in the arts, we identified photo elicitation as a potential solution to assisting CASA staff with engaging the youth in foster care to ascertain their

needs. Our goal is to eventually develop a training manual on how to utilize photo elicitation with adolescents in foster care so that other programs have an alternative, creative way to better serve this population and ensure adolescents are prepared for life outside of the foster care system.

Method

Participants

We invited a convenience sample of seventeen adolescent youth in foster care in a Mid-Atlantic state to participate in the study. All the youth were in foster care as a result of abuse and/or neglect. The youth were enrolled in the public child welfare's Independent Living program, which prepares adolescent youth for the transition out of foster care. Drs. Rice and Girvin attended an Independent Living meeting to discuss the study with the youth and invite them to participate. Youth were offered an additional \$75 stipend, by the public child welfare agency, to participate in the study. In addition to receiving permission from the public child welfare administrator and solicitor, approval to conduct the study was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board. To protect the adolescents who chose to participate in the study, no identifying information about them was collected. Additionally, the authors informed the adolescents that pictures depicting people or identified locations would not be publicized in order to protect their privacy. As suggested by our university's Institutional Review Board, the youth were advised that photographs that depict illegal activity such as pornography, drug use, or criminal behavior would be reported to the police and child welfare authorities.

Five youth volunteered to participate in this study, yielding a response rate of 29%. During the time of this study, there were 108 adolescents 16 years or older in foster care within the county in which this study took place. Our sample represents only 5% of this adolescent population. All adolescent participants were females. The majority of these females were Hispanic (80%), Caucasian (60%), 16 (60%), and in the ninth grade (80%).

Procedure

As suggested by Rose (2007), the six steps of a photo elicitation research design were employed. An initial meeting with the youth to explain the purpose of the study, obtain informed assent, collect demographic data, and distribute the disposable camera occurred during a regularly scheduled Independent Living meeting. The youth were provided with a brief lesson on how to use the 27-exposure disposable camera and then asked to photograph what is important to them. As photos need accompanying text to guide readers on how to treat the images taken (Rose, 2007), the participants were provided Photo Description Forms (see Appendix A) to complete for each photograph taken. This strategy, designed by Blinn and Harrist (1991), is a modification of Rose's suggestion to sit down with the participants afterward to interview them regarding the photos taken. Despite the modification, consistent with the purpose of the interviewing, the youth were asked to title the photo, describe the photo, and describe the thoughts and feelings each photo evoked in them. After two-weeks, the cameras and Photo Description Forms were collected from the public child welfare agency's Independent Living Coordinator. Upon developing the photos, copies of the photos were provided to the youth in appreciation for participation in the study.

Data Analysis

NVivo 9.0 (QSR International, 2011), qualitative software, was used to store and code the photographs and accompanying narratives. Across all participants, a total of 75 photos were taken. Content analysis, the preferred method with large amounts of photos (Rose, 2007), was employed. Content analysis allowed for the summary of coding categories to understand the symbolic qualities of the images and text in measureable terms (Krippendorff, 2003).

To ensure trustworthiness (Padgett, 2008), first level coding occurred separately by the first and third author. The first step in content analysis was to employ open coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to initially sort photos into groups that appeared to be similar. Analysis of the narratives associated with each photo was performed to identify similarities and differences between data segments and connect the similar meaning units together as categories or codes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Throughout the first-level coding of the photos/narratives, the first and third author collaborated to assess assigned codes and discuss rules established to assign data to certain categories. Based on this analysis, photos were regrouped to place similar meaning photos within the same category.

Following first-level coding, the three authors undertook second-level coding, comparing and contrasting the categories to identify the relationships among them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The goal was to collapse the categories into themes by identifying the patterns that emerged consistently in the data set. To ensure the themes were representative of the sample and not unique to only one or two youth, themes reflect categories identified in over half of the data set (i.e., at least three of the participants' photos/narratives had to reflect the category). Wanting to understand what matters to youth in foster care guided our development of the themes. Where differences occurred, discussion followed until agreement was reached. The differences reflected the name of the theme assigned to capture the same meaning of the datum. For example, rather than using "feelings," "emotional health" was assigned as it best captured the variety of the photos within that category. At times two words were assigned to a theme as they best captured the overall meaning of the photos/narratives within the grouping. For example, the codes "family" and "friends" represented the same meaning so they were combined to represent one theme. The final step was to identify the number or frequency of photos within each category. This number is represented below as each theme is further explored.

Results

Eight themes emerged from the analysis of the photos and accompanying narratives: family/friends, love/support, emotional health, freedom/future, accomplishments, safety/security, memories, and relaxation. These themes represent what is important to these adolescent youth who are in foster care due to abuse and/or neglect. Each theme is explored in further detail below.

Family/Friends

The majority of the photos represented family and/or friends ($n = 26, 36\%$). The adolescents reported the need to have someone who is always there for them, with whom they can do things, and who can make them laugh. This person could be a friend as one adolescent stated,

"I love her, she's one of my closest friends in my life."

On the other hand, this person could be a family member, either biological,

“Holidays are important because I go home to my bio family and be with them until the holidays are over.”

or foster,

“Even though I have bio family, my foster family is important to me because I love them like they’re my bio family.”

Therefore, the adolescents noted the importance of having someone close with whom they feel connected and on whom they can rely. This person provides a consistent source of support to the adolescents and is available to share things or celebrate.

Love/Support

Twelve of the photos (16%) represented the need to feel loved, supported, or important. The specific photos varied, ranging from images of people to items given to the youth from others. For example, one youth photographed flowers she was providing her mother for Mother’s Day and reported,

“I love flowers but specially these because they are a Mother’s Day gift. They are very special. They remind me that someone loves me.”

Through these photos, the adolescents identified people, places, and objects that represented the presence of love and support in their lives. The items and people captured in the photos acted as reminders that they are loved and significant to others.

Emotional Health

There were a number of photos ($n = 9$, 12%) representing emotional health, the need to have a place to process thoughts and/or feelings or have something to make the self happy. The photos comprised diaries and notebooks in which the youth could process their thoughts and/or feelings. There were pictures of self with accompanying narratives reflecting self-respect and/or self-love. Some youth also photographed locations, such as bedrooms, where they could go and think about things. One child photographed a trashcan and poignantly stated,

“We need to forget our past and throw it away so we can move on in life.”

The adolescents noted the negative impact that past and present circumstances could have on their lives. They recognized the need for an outlet for their thoughts and feelings as well as the importance of self-reflection.

Freedom/Future

A few photos ($n = 8$, 11%) depicted the theme of freedom/future. These photos represented hope for the future that provides freedom from the past. For example, Figure 1 had the following narrative associated with it,

“We need to go out into the real world and get a good look at life ahead and out of foster care.”



Figure 1: Outside

These photos illustrated an adolescent’s life beyond foster care and the opportunities that could be afforded to him/her in the future. As evidenced in the photographs, the adolescents noted the importance of looking forward to making positive changes in their life and moving on from experiences of the past.

Accomplishments

Six of the photos (8%) represented something the youth did, was doing, or learning that made them proud. There were pictures of textbooks, schools, and tests that represented how well the students were doing in school. Other youth photographed items that depicted something they attained such as a job, trophy, or license (see Figure 2).

“I learned how to drive in this car.”



Figure 2: Moving Blue

Therefore, the adolescents noted the need to succeed and be recognized and/or rewarded for the achievements. The youths' photos illustrated their pride in completed accomplishments and their desire to continue to build on their successes.

Safety/Security

It was not surprising that some of the photos ($n = 5, 7\%$) identified the need to feel safe due to the fact that these youth were removed from their homes due to experiencing abuse and/or neglect. The majority of the photos under this theme were pictures of the youth's current residence. For example,

“The house I live in. If I didn't live here I don't know where I would live.”

The youth identified their current homes as protection from the abuse and/or neglect they faced in the past. The photos of youths' homes not only represent a physical barrier that keeps them safe from others but also represents stable and secure shelter.

Memories

Despite the need to feel safe, the youth wanted items that reminded them of people or experiences from their past. Many of these photos ($n = 5, 7\%$) comprised albums, pictures, souvenirs, or items brought with them when entering foster care.

“It's important to me because it can store photos of precious memories so I will never forget them.”

Youth noted that they did not want to forget their past as the individuals from their past and/or the prior experiences shaped who they are. These photos represented ways for the youth to remember and preserve important pieces of their personal histories.

Relaxation

The last theme that emerged was relaxation. These photos ($n = 3, 4\%$) elucidated youths' desire to have a place or way to relax. There were photos of activities, hobbies, or locations. For example (see Figure 3),

“My room is my relaxing place. I love being in here.”



Figure 3: My Room

These photos represented the need for youth to have an outlet for relaxation. Youth identified places and activities that allowed them to be free from the stresses in life.

Discussion

The themes that we identified from this study are not that different from the themes identified in other photo elicitation studies exploring what matters to youth (e.g., Cameron et al., 2009; Goessling & Doyle, 2009; Morrow, 2001). Consistent with Berman et al. (2001), a theme of future or hopes and dreams emerged. This may imply that youth who experience trauma, either through abuse/neglect or war, have a desire to believe in a better future, one that provides them with opportunities. This processing or reflection of one's future is a benefit of photo elicitation as it allows youth to consider these things they may not have previously considered (Rose, 2007). For example, the role foster care plays in providing youth with an alternative future. Offering a means for youth to express hope not only empowers them but empowers others to see the potential in the youth (Ronen & Klein, 2007).

The youth in this study are often considered at-risk for future trauma (Tanaka, Werkerle, Schmuck, Paglia-Boak, & The MAP Research Team, 2011). Consistent with findings from another population of at-risk youth (Goessling & Doyle, 2009), the theme of family and friends emerged as the most prevalent theme. Despite often being the source of their initial trauma, the youth in this study desired a relationship with their biological family or someone (e.g., foster family, friends) who can offer them the love and support sought. This finding may demonstrate a level of resiliency within these youth as family emerged as the predominant theme in promoting resiliency among youth in the study by Cameron et al. (2009).

TTE or, more specifically, photo elicitation proved a useful way to better understand the youth in this sample. The explanation for its utility is likely multifaceted. Adolescents are regarded as a difficult population to engage. This is particularly problematic as the connection or alliance between "helper" and adolescent client is requisite for positive outcomes (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, & Bickman, 2006).

Many approaches to helping youth are based on treatments that work with adults. These interventions may not be conducive to engaging youth because of their developmental

stage and/or because the intervention is perceived as something the youth “have to do” at a time when they are struggling to gain a sense of independence. Adolescents also may experience a sense of stigma when participating in services that appear to be “too therapeutic” (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). Literature suggests that engaging adolescents and establishing a strong alliance require the expression of empathy and genuineness, the development of appropriate interventions, the increase in youth’s choice to participation, and an exploration of stigma (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). Photo elicitation provides the context for pursuing these objectives.

Strengths and Limitations

As with any research, this study had limitations that warrant mentioning. The sample size was small but not uncommon for qualitative research studies (Engel & Schutt, 2005). More concerning is the homogenous sample as all participants were females, 80% of whom were Latinas. Although the county in which the youth were placed into foster care has a large Hispanic population, the study’s sample is not representative of the population of youth in care. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution as what matters to youth may be influenced by adolescents’ culture.

Despite these limitations, this research study utilized an innovative methodology to engage a hard-to-reach population. Visual methodology has a universal appeal, one that can be used across cultures as it offers an unbiased approach to data collection (Berman et al., 2001).

Additionally, having the youth take an active role in the research process not only provided them with a creative avenue to voice their wants and needs, but empowered them as findings were subsequently utilized to guide case practice. For example, as a result of youth identifying accomplishments that made them proud, the child welfare agency recognized the need to deliberately highlight these positive accomplishments of the youth in the six-month court review documents.

Implications

Given the above stated limitations, ongoing research is warranted to assess if another sample of youth in foster care depicts similar findings. By replicating the study and producing similar results in another sample, more generalized policies and practice standards can be implemented within this child welfare agency regarding how to meet the needs of adolescent youth in care. Additionally, future research should pay attention to differences related to gender, race, ethnicity, and age as this sample was fairly homogenous.

There are a number of practice implications based on the findings from this research study. Child welfare practitioners are mandated to develop individualized case plans for each child in care (Alpert, 2005; Dumbrill, 2006). Utilizing findings documented by youth who participated in the photo elicitation project to guide the plan subsequently developed for that youth reinforces a strengths-based, person-centered approach to child welfare practice. This approach to practice is not only consistent with child welfare best practice standards (Alpert & Britner, 2005) but offers an innovative way to address the needs of a population aging out-of-care with no clear plan for the future.

Training is necessary to assist practitioners to effectively implement photo elicitation into practice. Organizations need to offer the necessary resources (e.g., supplies, support, ongoing training) to enhance consistent implementation of this methodology in practice with adolescent youth as consistent implementation has shown to positively affect case outcomes (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). Prior to entering direct practice, social work

educators can prepare students by educating them on this methodology and its benefit in engaging vulnerable populations, such as youth in care who have experienced multiple traumatic events.

Utilizing photo elicitation, an engaging and empowering methodology, allowed us to identify what is important to youth in foster care who have experienced abuse and/or neglect. Due to limitations, additional research is needed to explore the generalizability of results across adolescent youth in foster care. However, themes that emerged are consistent with those revealed in similar studies involving youth who have experienced some sort of trauma.

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Appendix A

Photo Description Form

What Matters: Using Photo-analysis to Explore Youths' Perceptions of What Is Important To Them

Photo Number _____

Participant ID _____

Provide a Title for this photograph:

Describe this photograph:

Describe your thoughts and feelings about this photograph:

Author Note

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