

# In the Frame: photovoice and mothers with learning difficulties

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper presents the results of a photovoice project involving mothers with learning difficulties. Photovoice is a technique that challenges the established politics of representation by putting people in charge of how they document their own lives. The authors describe how the project was carried out and the problems they encountered. Analysis of the content of the mothers' photo albums in the context of their own personal stories throws light on both their individual lives and their collective experience. The results challenge discriminatory views of the women as different mums.*

A growing number of researchers now recognise the importance of engaging with people who have learning difficulties in ways that subvert the barriers to communication and participation erected by what Bell & Newby (1977) have called the 'normative methodology' contained in standard text books. This article describes one small project that set out, quite literally, to see the world through the eyes of mothers with learning difficulties, using the method of photovoice.

## **What Is Photovoice?**

Photovoice uses photography as a means of accessing other people's worlds and making those worlds accessible to others. Formerly referred to as photo novella, the idea has developed from original work by Wang and Burris and colleagues (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang *et al.*, 1996, 1998; Wang, 1999) in the field of health promotion and education (see also Wang, 1998a,b). Wang and Burris acknowledge three key influences on the evolution of their work:

- feminist theory and especially its recognition of the importance of subjective experience, the personal realm and participatory methodology;
- Freire's (1972) notion of 'education for critical consciousness' with its implications for harnessing knowledge to community action;
- the tradition of documentary photography and its attempt to give visual expression to the social conscience.

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Photovoice involves giving people cameras and using the pictures they take to amplify their place in and experience of the world. It puts people in charge of how they represent themselves and how they depict their situation. The process challenges the established politics of representation by shifting control over the means for documenting lives from the powerful to the powerless, the expert to the lay-person, the professional to the client, the bureaucrat to the citizen, the observer to the observed. Photovoice is all about point-of-viewness: it sets out to capture and convey the point of view of the person holding the camera. Photovoice invites us to look at the world through the same lens as the photographer and to share the story the picture evokes for the person who clicked the shutter.

Photovoice as a technique has three main goals:

- to encourage people to reflect on and record aspects of their own identity and experience;
- to enable them to find personal strength and common cause with like others through sharing and group discussion of their photographs;
- to project a vision of their lives that might educate others, especially power brokers and policy makers, to better understand the realities of their condition.

As a method, photovoice involves a number of stages:

- setting up the group;
- agreeing the theme(s) of the project as a group;
- taking the pictures;
- selecting which photographs to use (either individually or as a group);
- contextualising the images/telling the stories contained in the pictures (where people explain what the photos they have taken mean to them);
- codifying the themes or messages linking the photographs (a group process of naming and acknowledging the collective experience to which the photos bear witness);
- targeting an audience beyond the group.

Photovoice presents features that make it particularly suited for use with sighted people who have learning difficulties. By combining visual images (the photo element) with individual and group discussion (the voice element), it helps to include people who lack verbal fluency. Photography as an activity emphasises action over cognition (we 'take' photos after all): it provides a means of concretising issues and concerns in a way that corresponds more closely to the thinking of people with learning difficulties than other more abstract modes of expression. Putting cameras in people's hands empowers them in a way that buries the issues of acquiescence and compliance frequently raised in other forms of research (Sigelman *et al.*, 1980, 1981), as well as going some way towards meeting the emancipatory ideals associated with the social model of disability. Finally, it allows people the opportunity to exercise choice as competent participants in the research process.

### **The Supported Learning Project**

The photovoice participants were all members of a support group for mothers with

learning difficulties set up as part of a Supported Learning Project (SLP). The SLP was a joint venture between the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Women's Cultural Club [1] providing support to mothers in their parenting through a combination of self-advocacy, new learning and mutual help. It was funded by the DfEE under the Adult and Community Learning Fund [2] and ran from September 1999 to August 2001. A full account and evaluation of the work of the SLP can be found in Booth & Booth (2003).

The support group met weekly in Sheffield Women's Cultural Club, a women-only space. The functions of the group were:

- to provide support and opportunities for new learning in a forum where mothers made the decisions;
- to foster friendships and mentoring relationships among the mothers that extended into their everyday lives;
- to serve as a base from which mothers could access learning resources in the wider community;
- to provide peer support and encouragement for mothers in pursuit of their learning;
- to address mothers' anxieties, fears and reservations about their participation in the project;
- to allow members to feel valued and competent;
- to develop confidence about functioning in a group setting as a basis for joining courses offered by other organisations;
- to reinforce their new learning;
- to provide opportunities for experiential learning through shared activities and problem solving.

The self-help movement has shown that a key way of helping people overcome a lack of confidence and forge a more positive identity for themselves is by ensuring they feel valued for what they are (Mullender & Ward, 1991; Kurtz, 1997). The support group was intended to provide this kind of validation for members both as women and as mothers.

Photovoice offered a new way of engaging with mothers in the SLP, one that enabled the mothers to define themselves in terms of the things they most valued in their lives. In this sense, it fitted the self-advocacy aims of the SLP by giving priority to the mothers' perspective, while at the same time challenging prejudicial views depicting them as different mums. Photovoice was seen as a means by which:

- SLP workers might better understand the mothers' lives and what was important to them;
- the mothers might gain a sense of solidarity from seeing themselves through other people's photos;
- the mothers' priorities could be identified as a basis for group action.

In this sense, the project was true to Dorothea Lange's aphorism that, 'The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera' (Lange, 1978).

### **Carrying out the Project**

Sixteen mothers volunteered to take part in the project. All were given a Kodak disposable camera loaded with a 39-exposure colour film. Some had never owned or used a camera before. Thirteen mothers returned their films for developing. Of the remainder, one mother had her photos developed herself, but chose not to show them to anyone; one said her camera had got broken, but declined the offer of a replacement; and one did not return to the group after taking the camera.

All the mothers were asked to photograph people, places and things that 'are important to you'. No other guidance was given. Wang (1998a) has suggested that the first workshop should never begin 'with the distribution of camera but with an introduction to the photovoice concept and method', including 'group discussion about cameras, power, and ethics'. Our view was that people do not usually let themselves in for a metaphysical debate when they buy a camera and that any such attempt to intellectualise the project might only alienate the mothers. Moreover, we were aware that the mothers came from a different background and led different lives to us: we felt it was better to leave them to negotiate the rules of their own community.

When they returned their film for developing, each mother was asked if a duplicate copy could be processed: one for them to keep and one for the project. No one refused. The mothers were given an opportunity to look through their photos on their own first and to remove any they did not wish anyone else to see.

Each mother's album was discussed with her individually in order to listen to the stories behind the photographs, to learn why these particular snaps had been taken and to understand the significance they had for her. The mothers were also invited to share their photographs with the group as a basis for getting to know each other better, and learning more about the shared concerns and common threads that characterised their lives.

The mothers enjoyed getting their photographs back. Everyone who handed over a film for developing made a point of attending the group when they knew their photos would be available for collection. All clearly enjoyed looking through them and made an effort to show them to the other mothers. Lorna cried when she was given hers.

### **Problems**

The project took longer than anticipated. The mothers set out with tremendous enthusiasm, fully expecting to return their films for developing within a week or two. In the event, it was 6 months before some of them finished their film. It now seems clear, with hindsight, that 39 exposures are too many (certainly for this group of people). The mothers found it difficult to use up the film quickly so put the camera aside and then kept forgetting to go back to it without occasional prompting.

Once all the films had been developed, a Wednesday meeting of the SLP support group was set aside to share and discuss everyone's photographs. The meeting was flagged well in advance. All mothers who had taken part in the project

were also sent personal letters reminding them of the event and encouraging them to attend. However, on the day, only six of the 13 mothers showed up. Having got their own photos and having talked about them one-to-one with the project facilitator, many seemed not to have enough interest in viewing other people's snaps to give time to the task. Again, this marked a departure from the original photovoice concept, which 'turns on involving people in defining issues' (Wang, 1998b). For our group of women, it tended rather to be the 'personal troubles of milieu' (Wright Mills, 1959) that occupied their thinking time and defined the reasons that brought them to the group.

Carrying out the project alongside others as part of a group undoubtedly helped to motivate the mothers, even if it did not lead to shared discussion, help to cultivate a critical consciousness or stimulate collective action in line with the photovoice ideal. For this reason, we would hold that photovoice as a method is best conceived and undertaken as a group activity, even when it might be expected that some of its more ambitious aims are likely to prove unattainable.

The most serious problem should perhaps have been foreseen. The mothers were asked if they would be willing to have a selection of their chosen photographs posted on the Internet in the form of an online exhibition on our supported parenting website. They declined. Whilst perfectly willing to show all their photographs to other mothers and workers in the SLP, they did not wish to open up their lives to the scrutiny of strangers or unknown others. A melange of unvoiced reasons lurked behind this preference, but a common link was the desire to avoid the limelight. Parents with learning difficulties are known to resent the close, often intrusive, surveillance they come under from the statutory authorities; their instincts are to hide away from the official gaze for fear of what might befall (Booth & Booth, 1994; Llewellyn & Brigden, 1995; McGaw, 1996). Unsurprisingly, the invitation to turn the public spotlight on themselves, their families and their friends met with a dusty response.

This presented us with an ethical teaser: finding an acceptable compromise between fulfilling the photovoice project and respecting the mothers' will. There is no copyright issue here. Ownership of the photographs was explicitly shared between the mothers and the project through the tangible device of producing duplicate copies. However, there is an issue of good faith. The project operated on the fundamental principle that mothers' interests and wishes always came first. In the end, we decided that using photographs without an individual provenance would not break this commitment. Anonymity would ensure the mothers' privacy was not breached. In arranging our photovoice gallery, only photographs without people in them or without any identifiable link back to the mothers and their families have been included. Pseudonyms have been used. False trails have been laid where necessary. By severing the connection between image and identity we have sought to safeguard the link between our promise and our accountability to the mothers.

The results may be viewed on our website (Booth & Booth, 2002a). The effect is less intimate than it might have been had we been allowed to draw on the full library of images the project produced. Even so, the gallery still presents a visual challenge to the stamp of otherness so often affixed to mothers with learning

difficulties. This paper takes up where the online gallery leaves off by presenting an analysis of the photographs that includes those we were unable to display.

### The Mothers' Albums

The 13 mothers who returned films for processing between them took 447 photographs, excluding those (about 45) they chose to keep to themselves or throw away. Most censored some snaps (mainly ones that had not turned out well, as far as we can judge). Table I shows the distribution of photos by subject for each mother.

A number of points emerge from the mothers' albums that open a window on their lives. In terms of those things they considered important enough to photograph, their pictures illustrate:

- *The primacy of children*: one-hundred-and-eighty-eight (42%) of all the photos featured their kids. Almost half (six) of the mothers used most of the film on their children. Those whose children did not figure prominently were those who no longer had them living at home, excepting only Deidre (who took photos of her grandchild instead) and Jez.
- *The importance of place*: one-hundred-and-twelve photos (25% of the total) featured homes and gardens, or other significant locations. Mothers who were no longer looking after their own children gave a special priority to places that were important and meaningful to them. Over half ( $n = 62$ ) of the photographs in this category came from just four mothers whose children had been placed in alternative care.
- *The significance of friends*: friends (including other members of the SLP) were again especially important for mothers who had lost their children: 82 of the 99 photographs in this category were taken by the five mothers without children at home.

The mothers' albums are also revealing in terms of things they chose not to photograph that might have been expected to feature more prominently:

- *The absence of partners*: men play a problematic role in the lives of mothers with learning difficulties (Booth & Booth, 2002b), and their ambivalent status as sources of both support and trouble is reflected in their marginal showing in the mothers' albums. Over half (seven) of the mothers took no photographs of their partner or had no partner to photograph.
- *The low profile of kin*: relatives, especially grandparents, are known to play a crucial role in supporting parents with learning difficulties in their parenting (Zetlin *et al.*, 1985; Llewellyn *et al.*, 1999; Llewellyn & McConnell, 2002). The majority of the photographs of extended family (25/43) were taken by just two of the mothers; six mothers had no photos of any relatives. The fact that there were not many snaps of family members is an indication of the social isolation that brought many of the mothers to the support group in the first place.
- *The invisibility of supports*: parents with learning difficulties are unlikely to

TABLE I. The contents of the photograph albums

	Emma	Jez	June	Carla	Lotti	Pip	Joyce	Judy	Deidre	Jem	Lorna	Connie	Stella	Total
Self	9	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	8	11	4	3	41
Husband/partner	3	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	3	5	5	22
Children	0	1	0	19	4	28	27	0	2	10	30	31	36	188
Extended family	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	2	7	3	1	8	5	43
Friends	4	0	1	0	0	6	1	18	0	21	0	1	0	52
House/garden	0	2	0	0	13	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	18
Significant location	4	20	17	8	11	2	0	18	14	0	0	0	0	94
Members of SLP	6	7	19	0	8	0	2	0	1	4	0	0	0	47
Pets	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	4	6	0	14
Support workers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	5
Other	0	0	1	4	0	0	1	0	8	2	0	1	0	17
No. of photos	24	30	38	32	38	34	38	30	33	38	38	38	36	447/541

NB. Photographs may include more than one subject and, hence, row and column totals do not tally.

succeed without support from the services, but too often they experience such support as intrusive and threatening (Andron & Tymchuk, 1987; McConnell *et al.*, 1997; Glaun & Brown, 1999). Only three mothers included photographs of practitioners in their albums. The shared wisdom within the support group, borne out of past suffering and current fears, was that officials of all sorts frequently acted in punitive and arbitrary ways, and were best avoided. Ultimately, such a view worked against the best interests of the mothers and their children by cutting them off from the support they desperately needed, and by increasing the risk of them failing the 'compliance test', which professionals used to judge their fitness as parents. The fact that so few mothers had established valued relationships with service workers is evidenced in their albums and symptomatic of these strains.

Looking at the collected photographs and analysing their subject matter in this way gives an insight into the commonalities of the lives of this group of mothers, but this is not the whole story. While the photographs taken together illuminate the mothers' lives in context, it is only through their individual lived experience that we can grasp the biographical significance of the photographs they each took. Jez, June, Judy and Lorna make the point.

- *Jez' album of 30 photographs contained 20 apparently anonymous streetscapes.*

Jez lives with her 4-year-old son, Darryl, in a semi-detached house on a pleasant tree-lined avenue, part of a small council estate in the city suburbs. Her parents live four doors away. An only child herself, she has no other family. Jez and Darryl have lived alone together ever since she threw out her partner, Darryl's father, shortly after Darryl was born. The two of them are very close: for the past 4 years their lives have been locked in the same orbit. Jez has been bringing Darryl with her to the support group every week since he was just a few months old, after her health visitor felt she would benefit from meeting other mums. Times are now changing. Darryl has started full-time in reception class at school and Jez feels his absence as a hole in her days. On first viewing, her streetscapes were a puzzle: why these empty urban vistas and why no Darryl? Talking with her about her photographs she explained that, 'They're of places Darryl likes or plays on.' She'd taken them of the route they used to follow on their way to the support group, a route she now walks alone. The photos show the concrete bench on which Darryl used to play, the bus station, a pub where they had a bite to eat. These are not lifeless street scenes after all. The images have a totemic significance as material representations of a phase in their mother-child relationship.

- *June took 36 photographs during a 2-day residential course at Northern College arranged by the SLP: 17 in and around the college itself and 19 of her friends in the support group.*

June is in her early thirties. She had her first child when she was 14 and a second a year later. Both were placed for adoption. Three more children followed in quick



succession. Although she had a long-standing partner, the father of all her children, the two of them never lived together and she coped alone as a single mother. As the children got older she began to find them more difficult to manage and, when she fell pregnant again, all three were placed in foster care. June's new baby, a girl, was removed at birth, despite her pleading that she could certainly look after one small tot after raising three children into their sub-teens. She was told the baby would be placed for adoption. Subsequently she was also informed that her other three children were going to be released for adoption, ending the contact she had assiduously maintained despite them having been split up and fostered separately in different parts of the county. June does not, will not, cannot now talk about her children. Unlike most of the other mothers, there were no photographs of them. Her feelings are buried deep behind the defences she has put up against further hurt. However, she has found comfort and strength from her friends in the support group, so they find a place in her album. The trip to Northern College was the first time she'd spent a night on her own away from home, so naturally she took some holiday snaps.

- *Judy used most of her film on snaps of her friends, a karaoke night at her local and her hamster.*

Judy gets lonely and depressed. Her hamster, she says, 'was company'. She lives on her own in a neat and well-appointed apartment. Photographs of Ricky, her son, as a baby and, older, in his school uniform, adorn the newly papered walls. One of her snaps shows her mother and sister hard at work with paper and paste decorating her lounge. Ricky, now 11, has been fostered with her sister since he was a year old. Judy feels his absence as a failure, even though she knows and accepts the arrangement is best for all of them. Although she has always seen him regularly, more so now he's started popping over on his own to visit her, she bitterly regrets missing out on so much of his growing up: 'I would have liked to have looked after him', she sighs. Judy tries to forget what might have been by keeping herself occupied. She searches out company, any company, to prevent herself from dwelling destructively on the past. Her days are a merry-go-round of non-stop activity. Hence, the importance of the pub and friends.

- *Lorna took 30 photographs of her children at a Family Centre on her last contact with them before they went for adoption.*

Lorna had dressed for the occasion and put on her finest. She wanted to impress on Tim (5) and Trixy (3) an image of herself as a smart, attractive, competent mother. The photographs show her in a dark blue sleeveless top and skirt, black tights and a navy blouse. Her hair is drawn back into a bun. She stands looking directly into the lens, arms at her side, head slightly to one side, a close-lipped smile on her face. Against the backdrop of brightly coloured children's artwork hanging on the wall of the Family Centre she could so easily be mistaken for a teacher in a classroom. Only the eyes tell a different story, unblinking with the effort of holding back tears that the darkness around the lids suggests she'd already shed earlier that day. Tim, sporting

a policeman's helmet, and Trixy, her auburn hair shining, are pictured laughing and playing with each other and the Centre's toys, unaware of the ordeal their mum is going through or the rite of passage the meeting marks for them. The social worker was on hand to take a succession of photographs of the three of them. Lorna is pictured hugging and kissing first Tim, then Trixy, then both of them together, with an intensity befitting a final goodbye. Knowing the photos may be the last she has of her children as children, Lorna beams and smiles for the camera. A later shot, taken back at home, bears witness to the emotional costs of her efforts and the day. Lorna is pictured, impassive in the arms of her partner, staring blankly ahead, expressionless, mouth drooping, cheeks pallid and puffy, a face with no make-up to mask the emptiness inside. Shortly afterwards she broke down, shut herself away from the world, began hacking at her body with broken bottles and, with nothing left to live for, gave way to a suicidal despair.

The photovoice project has provided two different angles of vision on the world of mothers with learning difficulties: a structural perspective and a biographical perspective. The albums offer an insight into the lives of individual mothers with learning difficulties at the same time as they illuminate the collective experience of these mothers as a group. In this way, photovoice offers a method for grasping what is going on at the point in people's lives where biography and society intersect.

## Conclusions

This paper has described the results of a photovoice project involving mothers with learning difficulties. The project had two distinct purposes: to carry forward the work of the Supported Learning Project attended by the mums, and to challenge discriminatory views about this group of vulnerable families by narrowing the gap between how others see them and how they see themselves. This paper has dealt mainly with this latter aim by showing how the mothers' albums blur the mark of difference so easily attached to marginal groups. Their photos show that what they consider to be important are things most people value—family, home and friends. They also show how these mothers often lack the supports that sustain these things—partners, relatives and services. Wright Mills (1959) pointed out long ago that, when people feel their cherished values are threatened, they experience a crisis. The mothers' personal stories (voiced here through four vignettes) illustrate how such crises erupt as personal troubles (loneliness for Judy, loss for Jez) or as public issues (alternative care) or, in Lorna's case, where the purpose of her being was undone, 'the total threat of panic'.

## NOTES

- [1] See <http://www.workstation.org.uk/WCLUB> for further information about Sheffield Women's Cultural Club. The SLP was based in the SWCC premises in Sheffield.
- [2] For further information about the Adult and Community Learning Fund see <http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/aclf/>

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