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At the Intersection of Method and empowerment: Reflections from a Pilot Photovoice Study with Survivors of Human Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

As human trafficking research increases, attention to ethical research methods with trafficking survivors is important to ensure equitable processes and reliable results for policy and social services. This article first describes Photovoice, a participatory research method that asks individuals to take photos and then to narrate the significance of those photos to develop critical consciousness, and second reflects on the Photovoice method for use with survivors of human trafficking. We outline a pilot Photovoice research project with survivors of human trafficking ($n = 4$) to consider the strengths, challenges, and opportunities that Photovoice offers for basic and applied research. When implemented as part of a trauma-informed and resilience-oriented framework, Photovoice promotes participants' sense of empowerment, self-competence, and self-esteem. We discuss how Photovoice can support vulnerable populations, including survivors of human trafficking, while also generating rich and nuanced research data. Our reflections on the lessons learned conducting Photovoice research will support others to implement the method to empower individuals who have survived human trafficking and will promote research contributing to a more just, peaceful, and inclusive society.



KEYWORDS

Photovoice; participatory action research; survivors of human trafficking; qualitative methods

Introduction

Survivorship has been an increasingly significant topic for research in recent years ("Cancer.Net," 2020; Park et al., 2009). Research exploring the perspectives of survivors¹ of human trafficking, though historically scant (Macy & Johns, 2011; Rajaram & Tidball, 2018), is increasing (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018; Gerassi et al., 2018). Support is growing for participatory (Hounmenou, 2020) and trauma-informed (Hart et al., 2018; USDHHS, 2018) research approaches, as well as use of a resilience framework with vulnerable populations (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Leitch, 2017; Masten et al., 1990; Southwick et al., 2014). These approaches to research methods can maximize the experiences of trafficking survivors while minimizing the risk of re-traumatization.

This article describes Photovoice, a participatory research method that asks individuals to take photos and narrate the significance of those photos, and then reflects on this method for use with survivors of human trafficking. We first provide a brief overview of survivor-focused human trafficking research, and outline both the inherent challenges of researching a vulnerable population and the growing support for participatory, trauma-informed, and resilience-oriented research approaches. We then review the Photovoice research method with an eye to its applicability for use with vulnerable populations, such as survivors of human trafficking. Next, we briefly describe a pilot Photovoice research project (Lockyer, 2019) with survivors of human trafficking to highlight the method's

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¹For this article, the term "survivor" refers to individuals who have lived through and beyond being a victim of human trafficking as defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 ("USTVPA," 2000; USDHHS, 2017).

strengths, challenges, and opportunities. We share the study design, implementation, and results to ground reflections on Photovoice as a research method with the goal to help others implement Photovoice and the data it generates more thoughtfully. Further, this paper contributes to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 of “Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls,” and 16 “Promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies. The research method described here enabled participants to become more aware of their strengths and achievements, an important aspect of empowerment. By highlighting the perspectives of survivors of human trafficking, this article promotes the inclusion of those whose voices often go unheard.

Survivor-Focused Human Trafficking Research

The criminal and hidden nature of human trafficking, together with the generally marginalized and vulnerable populations impacted by the crime (Clawson et al., 2009; Hardison Walters et al., 2017; ILO, 2017; U.S. Department of State, 2016), pose considerable ethical challenges for researchers who seek to understand the perspectives of survivors. A critique leveled at research involving traumatized individuals is that they may be re-traumatized in the research process (Leitch, 2017). When engagement with trafficking survivors is insensitive or uninformed, the risk of harmful interactions increases (Bender, 2014; Countryman-Roswurm, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Patton Brackin, 2017; Lloyd, 2013; Powers & Paul, 2018; Smith, 2014). To minimize this risk, anti-trafficking advocates and scholars have recommended participatory, trauma-informed, and resilience-oriented research approaches (Foot, 2015; Hounmenou, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Schwarz et al., 2016; Todres, 2011).

A collaborative approach to research, including participatory research, recognizes that sharing power with participants who have knowledge and expertise in the subject matter offers a number of benefits. Participatory research has been utilized in studies in healthcare (Allen & Hutchinson, 2009; True et al., 2015), homelessness (Johnson et al., 2017), education (Latz et al., 2016) and child sex trafficking (Briski & Kaufman, 2005; Hounmenou, 2016). Anti-trafficking advocates argue that survivor input is essential for human trafficking research (Powers & Paul, 2018) “and ‘can provide an antidote to top-down, evidence-thin policies and practices’ so prevalent in the anti-trafficking movement. (Weitzer, 2014, p. 21)”. Participatory action research (Kemmis et al., 2013; MacDonald, 2012) aims to democratize the research process by transforming participants and researchers into a collaborative team. By conducting research *with* participants, not *on* participants, the participatory approach highlights different forms of knowledge, and makes “self-determination, emancipation, and personal and social transformation” the central aim of research (Maguire, 1987). Participatory research aims to facilitate positive change for participants using research as the tool for social change (Latz, 2017).

Trauma-informed research prioritizes the safety and healing of participants and strives to avoid re-traumatizing vulnerable populations. Elements of a trauma-informed approach include being as transparent as possible about the research process, maximizing participant choice and empowerment, being aware of trauma responses, ensuring safety and confidentiality, providing emotional support (if needed), and being reflexive about researcher bias, privilege, and power (Dang, 2018; Dang & Lutnick, 2018; Day 2018; USDHHS, 2018).

A resilience research framework implies attention to participants’ strengths, competencies, protective factors, and processes that may contribute to or account for the protective factors. Taking a resilience-oriented approach means recognizing that participants are complex and whole beings, valuable not only for their vulnerability or trauma. Studies employing such a framework have explored resilience in individuals with HIV/AIDs (Kabel et al., 2016), youth dealing with substance abuse (Meschke & Patterson, 2003), children who have experienced chronic trauma (Masten et al., 1990), and women exiting the sex trade (Hickle, 2017). Clinical research has emphasized the importance of trauma-informed and resilience-oriented interventions for survivors of trafficking to promote their health and well-being, and reinforce their dignity and trust (Aron

et al., 2006; Caliber, 2007; Clawson & Dutch, 2008; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015).

Photovoice

Photovoice is an evidence-based, participatory action method that has been shown to enhance participants' sense of empowerment and confidence, which are critical elements of overall health and well-being (Duffy, 2011; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2000). Photovoice projects “reflect core tenets of community-based participatory research (CBPR), including a commitment to the empowerment of participants and balancing research with action, and have been gaining traction as an effective means to address a variety of public health concerns” (True et al., 2015, p. 1443). The method represents a synthesis of scholarship and social justice that answers calls for research that includes the perspectives and understandings of those being studied, attends to “liberatory and life-enhancing outcomes” (Huffman & Tracy, 2018, p. 1) of the research, and expresses solidarity with populations that have been stigmatized or marginalized (Burk, 2018; Maguire, 1987). Photovoice has been used historically as a method which showcases the knowledge and perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups whose voices often are unheard (Latz, 2017), including single mothers (Duffy, 2011), individuals with mental illness (Ruscinova et al., 2014; Photovoice at the Youth Services Center, nd), individuals with HIV/AIDS (Kabel et al., 2016), residents living in distressed neighborhoods (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005), recently returned war veterans (True et al., 2015), homeless individuals (Wang et al., 2000), and women in rural China (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The Photovoice method leverages the synergy between the photos taken by participants and the narratives of their experience to convey rich and nuanced meanings. Latz (2017) argues that including a form of art in the research process empowers participants to more fully convey the depth and nuances of their feelings and understandings than if they were limited to expressing themselves through talk alone. Participants in Photovoice projects become co-researchers as they take photos from their daily lives in response to photo prompts. The prompts are chosen by the researcher, or collaboratively with participants, based on the topic of study. After taking and sharing their images with the researchers, participants narrate the meaning of their photos in interviews (Wang & Burris, 1997). By stimulating a nurturing environment, Photovoice empowers participants to safely explore their experiences, and tell their stories in novel and profound ways. Interview data are analyzed, often thematically, and analytic findings and photos are shared in a photo exhibit for the public, and in academic articles. Photovoice projects have been shown to reduce self-stigma, promote proactive coping with societal stigma, and help integrate prior life experiences with participants' current lives (Duffy, 2011; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Ruscinova et al., 2014; True et al., 2015).

Internationally, Photovoice is an increasingly used participatory research method focused on recovery and wellness. One cornerstone of the method is its potential to promote critical consciousness for participants related to the topic of study (Carlson et al., 2006; Latz, 2017; Liebenberg, 2018; Teti et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2016). Critical consciousness is related to self-awareness and implies that “individuals realize that their actions can either maintain or disrupt their social realities” (Latz, 2017, p. 40). It involves a person's ability to recognize and critically consider external and internal factors that maintain or disrupt their life situation, including systems of oppression as well as their own social positionality, assumptions, choices, and behaviors. Enhanced critical consciousness is thought to empower individuals to work toward meaningful change in their own lives and in society (Liebenberg, 2018). For survivors of human trafficking, the critical self-reflection involved in a Photovoice project can be especially empowering. The trauma and loss of freedom involved in human trafficking experiences often leave survivors with a sense of disempowerment and hopelessness, which contribute to chronic mental health challenges, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Zimmerman et al., 2008). The opportunity to tell their stories through images and narration not only helps survivors to process and make sense of their trauma (Lockyer & Wingard, 2020; Mansfield et al., 2010; Pals, 2006), it leads to a “cognitive awakening” about how their assumptions, choices and

actions have shaped their lives (Carlson et al., 2006; Liebenberg, 2018). These introspective processes that are part of Photovoice, lead to an enhanced sense of self-empowerment and agency that can benefit survivors of human trafficking (Teti et al., 2012).

Methods

In the following section, we outline a pilot Photovoice study with survivors of human trafficking to ground a discussion of the strengths and challenges of the method for use with vulnerable populations. The study entitled “Exploring Resilience after Trauma using Photovoice” (Lockyer, 2019) is, to our knowledge, the first study using Photovoice to explore resilience in adult survivors of human trafficking. The study asked how survivors of human trafficking understand their own resilience, healing, and recovery, and took a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented approach to minimize the possibility of re-traumatizing participants. Photovoice projects can reflect different levels of participation. Depending on the goals of the study, participants may be involved in various aspects of research design and implementation, including determining the research question(s), photo prompts, timeframe, analysis, and dissemination method(s) for the study. In this project, the researcher determined the research question and timeframe, and conducted the analysis while participants chose the photo prompts and dissemination method, and participated in initial analysis. The project spanned five weeks from the first to last group meeting (excluding the exhibit) in order to maximize likelihood of participant attendance, and to allow adequate time for participants to reflect on resilience in their lives, take photos to represent their ideas, and participate in interviews. Findings from the project aimed to inform understandings of how to promote and support resilience not only for survivors of human trafficking, but for others who experience trauma and adversity. The study received IRB approval from San Francisco University (Protocol Number: H18-15).

Study Setting and Recruitment

The pilot project took place at San Francisco SafeHouse, a 501(c)3 nonprofit transitional residential program serving homeless women who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation. The researcher was a long-time volunteer providing direct services to survivors of human trafficking in a shelter setting, a policy advocate at the regional level, and an academic researcher of human trafficking. Being a volunteer at the San Francisco SafeHouse facilitated the researcher’s collaboration with staff and granted what might be considered insider status (Qin, 2016). However, as an educated, white woman who is not a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation the researcher was an outsider in terms of life experience. To mitigate potential complications related to power and status differences, the researcher employed strategies to elicit participant voices and decision-making as much as possible in the research process. Building rapport, positioning participants as co-researchers, facilitating inclusive group discussions, and building in as much collaborative decision making as possible into the research process were some such strategies.

In the recruitment phase, San Francisco SafeHouse staff contacted prospective participants and informed them of the opportunity to be a part of the project, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and avoiding placing undue pressure on them to participate. Staff assessed and screened participants in regards to mental health and living status based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Table 1), and only then shared participants’ contact information with the researcher. All group and individual meetings were held in a private room to ensure the confidentiality of participants. The study used criterion sampling (Patton, 2002), to identify participants who meet predetermined criteria (see Table 1). Criterion sampling is typically used to identify and understand information rich cases with the potential to provide qualitative depth within the criteria.

Study participants were four women graduates ($n = 4$) of San Francisco SafeHouse. Protecting participants’ confidentiality and privileging the ways in which they chose to identify themselves were key aspects of the trauma informed research design. Participants chose to be identified by their initials,

Table 1. Inclusion/exclusion for criterion sampling.

Participants are survivors of human trafficking.
Participants have successfully graduated from the San Francisco SafeHouse program.
Participants are adults (>18 and < 80 years of age).
Participants identify as female gender, including transgender women.
Participants are currently in a stable, independent living situation as assessed by San Francisco SafeHouse staff.
Participants are proficient in speaking and reading English.
Participants have access to e-mail.
Participants are not be currently experiencing severe mental illness, as evaluated by San Francisco SafeHouse staff.

and the study omitted any demographic information which could personally identify participants or jeopardize their safety. I include here a brief personal sketch of each participant to give context from which to understand their interview comments.

MJ is a Caucasian self-identified cis-gendered woman, who has experienced domestic violence, addiction, homelessness, and commercial sexual exploitation. At the time of the study, she worked at a treatment center for people recovering from substance abuse while pursuing her education to get certified as a health counselor. SG identifies as a transsexual, African-American transwoman who is almost sixty years old. She has a history of difficulties due to her sexual identity, involvement in the criminal justice system, addiction and homelessness. SG works for an organization that advocates for and supports LGBTQ individuals. SS was born outside of the U.S. and is a married women for whom English is a second language. She considers her experiences with exploitation and homelessness to be ones that will empower her in the future. She is engaged in an unspecified immigration documentation process in hopes of bringing her husband to the U.S. SS has many goals and ambitions for the future. JC is an African-American woman with a history of addiction, complications from a serious illness, commercial sexual exploitation, and homelessness. Her main focus during the project was supporting her physical and emotional health.

Data Collection

Stage 1: Initial Group Meetings

In the first group meeting, the researcher and participants discussed project procedures, options, and schedule, the meaning of resilience, basic photography skills, safety and photography, and ideas for story-telling through images. A week later at the second group meeting, participants collaboratively chose five resilience-related questions (See Table 2) out of twenty possible photo prompts, based on their understandings of post-traumatic resilience. They then used these prompts as the basis to take photos about their daily life.

Stage 2: Photo Collection

Over the next two weeks participants took photos in response to the five photo prompts, and texted or emailed the digital images they had chosen that best conveyed their ideas on resilience to the researcher. Participants sent 129 digital photos. Once received, photos were transferred and stored on Box.com, a secure cloud storage service. Images did not include people, identifiable locations, or illegal activities.

Stage 3: Individual Interviews

After receiving participants’ photos, the first author scheduled follow-up face-to-face interviews in which each participant was asked to narrate and explain how their images represented resilience in their lives. A semi-structured interview guide based on the SHOWed technique, a well-established method for guiding photovoice discussion, was used to discuss each photo (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Participants selected from among their total photos a smaller set that were most meaningful to them to be included for analysis and for a future public exhibit showing the combined results of their photos and narratives (See Table 3). Interviews lasted between 1 hour 20 minutes and 1 hour

Table 2. Photo Prompts Chosen by Participants (in bold) from twenty possible photo prompts²

- What makes you feel powerful?
- 1. What motivates you?**
What kind of relationship(s) has helped you?
What is your ideal self?
What strength, skill, knowledge or belief has helped you the most?
What does self-care look like for you?
What does coping look like for you?
How do you fit in to your community?
What is your greatest strength?
- 2. What makes you feel healthy?**
- 3. What does personal growth look like for you?**
When do you feel connected with friends and loved ones?
How do you handle tough experiences?
What does “normal” look like for you?
- 4. What does your strength look like?**
What does a healthy and meaningful relationship look like?
What does it look like when you feel competent? Accomplished?
How do you adapt to change?
What is good about your life?
- 5. Show what bouncing back means to you.**

²Prompts are informed by: Luthar, S. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and psychopathology*, 12(4), 857–885.

Table 3. Data corpus.

Data Type	Data Quantity
Photos – total	129 images
Photos – subset for analysis	40 images
Interview data set	40 single-spaced pages
Field Notes	13 single-spaced pages
Analytic Memos	12 single-spaced pages

45 minutes and were digitally recorded. Segments of the interviews that related to resilience were transcribed verbatim for analysis and reporting.

Stage 4: Group Photo Sharing

Participants attended a culminating group meeting in which they shared and explained their photos. Participants asked questions, reflected, and commented on each other’s photos. For their time and insights participants received stipends of 50 USD each, in the form of prepaid cash cards. The first author recorded hand-written condensed fieldnotes during the group photo sharing session and subsequently expanded them into written fieldnotes (Spradley, 1980). Extensive field notes, which were written after all group meetings, were used and consulted throughout data analysis. The full data corpus consisted of participants’ photographs, a subset of photos used for analysis, the interview data set, fieldnotes, and analytic memos. (See Table 3)

Stage 5. Public Exhibit

Participants’ photos with relevant excerpts from interview data were displayed in a Photovoice exhibit at an Annual Anti-Human Trafficking Conference (Lockyer, 2019). The exhibit was viewed by approximately two hundred conference attendees, including state and local politicians, anti-trafficking activists, and representatives from local service organizations, city government, and law enforcement.

Data Analysis

According to Latz (2017) there is scant guidance provided by extant Photovoice research literature on analytic methods. Studies generally focus on the participatory aspects of analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997). Some Photovoice studies conduct quantitative analysis of data (Budig et al., 2018; Ratcliff et al., 2018; Russinova, 2014). Other researchers have relied upon inductive thematic analysis, but prior analyses have also been informed by the grounded theory method strategies (Adegoke & Steyn, 2017; Charmaz, 2006; Kabel et al., 2016; Latz, 2017; Teti et al., 2012; True et al., 2015; Van Oss et al., 2014).

The pilot study took a participatory, interpretive, qualitative analytic approach using a modified form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2014) to explore the relationship among images, narratives, and resilience (Cho & Lee, 2014). We used standard thematic analysis techniques to explore ideas and patterns in the data to generate themes reflecting participants' perspectives. We adapted the standard thematic analysis procedures in two ways. First, affirming a participatory approach (Latz, 2017) in the data collection phase, we used the group photo sharing meeting (cf. Stage 4) as an occasion to invite participants to take part in preliminary analysis activity using a three-stage approach of selecting, contextualizing, and codifying the images (Wang & Burris, 1997). During the group session, the first author asked participants to select images that were most meaningful to them. Next, each participant explained the narrative context for those images. The photos were used to elicit deeper and richer participant reflections about their lived experiences. Finally, participants were asked to explore together larger patterns they observed across the images. Participants identified the following photo-themes: *love, changes we went through in the past, journey of life, God, and not feeling good enough*. After the group meeting, these ideas were used as the starting point for more formal thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2014) that included both the conversation among the group and the individual interview data, but not the photos by themselves. The second way we modified standard thematic analysis procedure was by writing analytic memos (Charmaz, 2006) throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study. For example, while transcribing rich segments of individual interview data, the first author wrote memos to help generate preliminary analytic ideas and shared them with the second author. Similarly, the authors conducted data discussion sessions with peer colleagues to help explore possible meanings and ideas to structure and guide analysis and write-up.

Results

As is common with most people who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation (Rekard, 2005; Saar et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2011), several participants experienced multiple serious life challenges such as childhood neglect and abuse, homelessness, addiction, violence, and exploitation. As such, their perspectives were shaped by their intersectional identities related to their adverse life experiences and are not limited only to experiences of sexual exploitation.

Through their photos and interviews, participants constructed their ideas about resilience in various ways. Sometimes participants' comments were *in response* to the photos in which they used both the photo and the interview to construct their ideas on resilience. In other cases, participants' remarks on resilience were *embedded in talk and stories* that were not directly connected to either the prompts or the photos. Both photos and interviews were analyzed together to generate themes across participants and to construct methodological insights. This article does not provide an in-depth discussion of the findings related to resilience. Rather, the goal of this article is to reflect on the strengths, challenges, and opportunities offered by Photovoice as a research method, with an eye to its relevance for use with vulnerable populations.

Reflections on Photovoice as a Research Method

Photovoice enhanced and deepened participant reflections and understandings about resilience both due to the participatory research design, and the synergy between visual and interview data. Methodologically, the participatory research design offered two advantages to study participants' experiences of post-traumatic growth. First, this method impacted the study design and analytic procedures. Second, Photovoice provided benefits for participants by increasing their critical consciousness about role of resilience in their lives (Carlson et al., 2006; Latz, 2017; Liebenberg, 2018; Teti et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2016). These insights are further developed in the following sections.

Photovoice Impacts Research Design

Photovoice prioritizes participants' understandings about the topic of study. The participatory aspect of Photovoice contributed to this study's design in at least two ways. First, the collaboration with participants to shape the research design informed and guided their inquiry. For example, before taking photos (cf. Stage 1), participants discussed and collaboratively selected five photo prompts which would inspire their images (refer to Table 3). The photo prompts that participants chose were important, not only because they reflected their ideas about resilience, but also because they shaped the research process from its inception. The procedural steps of choosing photo prompts, taking photos in response to the prompts (cf. Stage 2), and then discussing the meaning of the photos (cf. Stages 3 & 4) helped participants zero in on what was most meaningful to them about their resilience. Because the method empowers participants to determine which paths their photographs and interviews will take, they explored issues and topics that the researcher would not have known to ask about. Thus, the participatory nature of Photovoice offered deep and rich access to participant meanings and understandings about the topic of research.

Second, the participatory nature of Photovoice impacted analytic procedures. During data analysis, participants generated initial themes or patterns they observed in the data by sharing photos and their meanings with each other in the culminating group meeting. (cf. Stage 4) This initial set of themes served as the starting point of analysis because they highlighted what participants considered to be key shared understandings about the topic of study. Subsequent analytic procedures were grounded in the initial analysis of participants. Another interesting analytic impact of the participatory research design was observing that some participants offered different meanings about their photos in the individual interviews during Stage 3 and in the culminating group meeting during Stage 4.

Several participants described new or different meanings in the culminating group meeting from the ones they shared in the individual interview. For example, one participant briefly mentioned a past traumatic experience in the interview, but provided descriptive and emotional details about the experience and its meaning in the culminating group meeting. Another participant shared a completely different meaning about a photo in the group meeting than she had described in her interview. Both meanings may have been equally true and valid – they were not contradictory. These changes in meaning demonstrate how different and evolving understandings are made available via the various participatory aspects of Photovoice. Understanding that meanings can evolve throughout the project can impact analysis. In sum, participant engagement in research design, data collection and production, and initial analysis, impacted the overall study design in ways which facilitated and gave insight into their profound reflections about the topic of study.

Photovoice Enriches the Data Collected

Variation and Range of Photo and Interview Responses

One result of the study was the range of responses to the prompts visually and in interviews. Visually, participants responded with photos that were sometimes literal and sometimes symbolic interpretations of the prompts. Literal responses involved factual or concrete representations of actual things or

events, the plain meaning of the prompts, such as everyday items, and meaningful locations and scenarios. For example, one participant took photos of the beauty products (see [Figure 1](#)) she used as a literal interpretation of the prompts (see Excerpt 1). On the other hand, symbolic responses used photos to emphasize the figurative interpretation of prompts. One participant took a photo of two tiny snails (See [Figure 2](#)) as a symbolic interpretation of her life circumstances (see Excerpt 3). The range of responses was particularly salient in the photographic data. Photos featured locations, vistas, buildings, structures, and works of art that held meaning for participants. Photos also included scenarios, usually staged by the participant, to demonstrate something meaningful about a relationship, a practice, or experience related to resilience. Participants' visual representation strategies also inspired a wide range of interview responses as well.

In their interviews, participants responded to a combination of the original photo prompt and its relationship to the photo itself. Participants seemed to take three distinct orientations to the relationship among prompt, photos, and interviews. First, participants oriented to the visual image as a mental anchor to which they returned again and again as they described meanings about resilience, which facilitated lengthier and more detailed remarks. Second, when analyzing the data, we noticed that symbolic representations could only be understood through the explanations of personal circumstances during individual and group interviews. Finally, some participants articulated valuable insight into resilience embedded in talk that on first glance appeared unrelated to either the prompts or resulting photos. Participants' digressions and segues to topics and stories that did not explicitly relate to prompts or photos comprise this type of data. For example, when describing a photo about her past, one participant went on to talk at length about how she intended to overcome her current career challenges. In the remainder of this section, we illustrate the dynamic interaction among prompts, photos, and interviews to show how a range of visual and verbal responses meaningfully intertwine to create rich data for understanding trafficking survivors' experiences of resilience.

JC was a survivor whose photos and interview comments primarily represented literal responses. JC interpreted the prompts by documenting aspects related to daily life in the present moment. All of her photos featured actual, tangible items from her daily life, such as beauty products (refer to [Figure 1](#)) that help her feel motivated, strong, and healthy. In Excerpt 1, JC described how she used the photo prompts as a way to decide which photos to take:



Figure 1. "Beauty Products" by JC.



Figure 2. “Future” by SS.

Excerpt 1. JC

At first I started out with the things that make me feel beautiful . . . that make me feel like I’m more powerful. And then I started thinking about things that actually just pertain to my life. Because when I’m at home, [points to her photos] all of these things are the things that I use daily. So I decided to use all the things where I reside . . . Daily life is pretty much all the questions for me.

Throughout her interview, she shared how her appearance, what she called her “presentation,” deeply influenced how she felt about her place in the world. She explained that her beauty products help her to feel powerful, and that she belongs. Taken together, the photo and interview response demonstrate that JC’s perspectives about resilience are grounded in everyday life practices.

Another participant, SS, was a survivor whose photos and interview comments primarily represented symbolic and metaphoric responses to represent her entire life journey, including the past, present, and future. She explained her photos in sequence from past to future, using metaphors to inform what she chose to photograph visually. When she arrived at the image representing “the future” (see [Figure 2](#)) that features an image of a spindly rose bush with leggy branches, but just one rose, SS looked quietly at the image for approximately 20 seconds before she explained:

Excerpt 2. SS

That’s my future . . . the place that I will be . . . I’m that one, with a beautiful smell, beautiful shape . . . I got hurt. If you look at that, it is not that much healthy completely, it’s like a little damaged . . . but still is beautiful. It still is a flower and still has a smell.

When she pointed to the flower she said, “That’s my future,” connecting the health of the flower, which symbolically represents her future self, with her own condition. When she said, “I got hurt,” she compares herself to the flower, which is “a little damaged”. Despite the injury, SS indicated a sense of stalwart hope in her own future in her comment that the rose “still is beautiful. It still is a flower, and still has a smell.” She articulates the paradoxical reality of a damaged, yet still beautiful, fragrant flower as symbolizing how she retains her identity and sense of self despite traumatic experiences. For her, the photo visually appears to capture an abstract idea about resilience that she may not have been able to put into words before.



Figure 3. "Two Snails" by SS.

The ways JC and SS approached representing their ideas visually and verbally exemplify a range of response types. Because the visual and narrative aspects were synergistic, responses were not restricted and resulted in multiple dimensions and representational modalities.

Synergy between Visual and Oral Data

Early in the research study, participants struggled to represent ideas about relationships, beliefs, and emotions visually, which challenged them to deepen their thinking. Photovoice capitalizes on the nuance, texture, and depth of visual images to capture ideas using multiple representational modalities in the form of visual images as well as oral narratives. Communicating about resilience through multiple modalities created space for participants to think in new and creative ways and appeared to deepen participants' thinking about resilience (Carlson et al., 2006).

For example, during the individual interview SS reflected on the image of a pair of small snails moving across her palm (see [Figure 3](#)), a symbolic photo. Narrating the image of the two snails, she voiced multiple intersecting aspects of her life, including relationships, time, self-awareness, and personal determination. In the moments immediately before Excerpt 3, SS shared that the snails represent her and her husband as they waited during a lengthy immigration process.

Excerpt 3. SS

They [the snails] know that they are vulnerable. Any creature can destroy them. You know? And they are very fragile at the same time too. But they are strong enough make their shell. To like protect themselves. So yeah, I know that I'm very fragile. I know that anybody can hurt me. But I am going to make as much as I can to protect myself ...

The snails metaphorically represent her and her husband's vulnerability and fragility as they await her visa approval. The composition of the photo is also meaningful. That the tiny snails are placed in a huge hand evokes the sense that some colossal power which is many times more powerful than she and her husband holds their future in its figurative hand. In her comments, "But they are strong enough make their shell. To like protect themselves," she shares that the snails also symbolize strength and the ability to protect themselves. The image and her comments combine to evoke both the sluggish pace of the process she finds herself in, and also the way she and her husband press on together, however gradually, despite not being able to see what's coming ahead. She discussed Einstein's theory of relativity to explain how time sometimes moves slowly (as it does for her right now) and sometimes moves rapidly (as it did when she was trying to escape her exploiters). SS used this symbolic photo to articulate her struggles and feelings about a current situation with a nuance and complexity that she may not have been able to express in words alone. SS exemplifies how visual images and the interview work together to enable participants to access and express abstract ideas and rich insights, resulting in enhanced research data.

Photovoice and Critical Consciousness

A cornerstone of the Photovoice method is its potential to raise participants' critical consciousness (Carlson et al., 2006; Latz, 2017; Liebenberg, 2018; Teti et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2016). In this pilot study, Photovoice appeared to promote participants' self-awareness about the role of resilience in their lives. Specifically, participants recognized both internal and external factors contributing to their resilience, suggesting an enhanced critical consciousness.

Participants interacted dynamically with the study by reflecting on resilience for five weeks, responding to prompts, actively taking photos, and knowing they would need to explain their photos. Some participants reported taking a few photos every few days, and others took almost all of their photos in one day. For all participants, this project was the first time they had dedicated weeks to consciously reflecting on their resilience and recovery from having been trafficked. Participants described several "ah-ha" moments in which they gained insight into their lives during the interview directly related to the Photovoice methods. For example, in Excerpt 4 MJ describes her thoughts and feelings as she viewed all together the photos she chose to discuss in her interview, and responded to the question of what she learned about herself through the Photovoice process.

Excerpt 4. MJ

Wow. It's huge. [long pause] I believe in myself when I see those pictures – I personally made all of that happen. Wow! ... Wow. I don't ever want to forget this. I don't want to ever get too content to where I forget that all the struggles and everything I had to get to, to make this possible ... I'm stronger than I thought, stronger than I give myself credit for. And, thank you, Lord. It's amazing ... I'm speechless really, honestly, I'm speechless. I didn't think of that that way [tears up] ... I'm proud of myself. Yeah, I'm proud of myself.

The process of viewing, reflecting on, and discussing her photos gave MJ new self-awareness. During the interview, she gained new perspectives on relationships, inspiration to move ahead, and pride in her inner strength and accomplishments. The project helped motivate her to not forget the "struggles

and everything” she has gone through to move forward with her life in a positive way. The insight that she is “stronger than I thought, stronger than I give myself credit for,” was a profound realization for MJ. The emotional impact was evidenced by her tears and comment, “I’m speechless really, honestly, I’m speechless.” In the moment, she realized that she has been responsible for the ways she has recovered and healed from trauma. MJ’s situation exemplifies the important benefits of critical consciousness: self-insight and awareness contributing to a positive self-concept and positive feelings, such as pride. Involvement in the Photovoice project gave her access to new self-awareness about the impact her choices and actions had in promoting her resilience.

Participants’ contributions during the group interview (Stage 4) also suggest enhanced critical consciousness. Participants discussed what they liked best about the study, such as realizing they have a lot to be proud of, and reflecting on how far they have come in their recovery and healing. They shared that Photovoice gave them the time and space to consider their resilience, something they don’t usually do in their busy day to day lives. Participants mentioned that mindful reflection – a key aspect of the Photovoice method – is what they liked best about the project. The ability to look back on the past from the present moment and see the progress they’ve made contributed to a heightened awareness of resilience. The self-reflection required in Photovoice challenged them to think in new and creative ways, which led to increased recognition of their own motivation, strength, health, and personal growth. Participating in the Photovoice project may have been the first time participants took time out of their busy daily schedules to look back on and contemplate their life journey. Further, awareness of the important ways they actively and dynamically contribute to their resilience, through their own motivation, strength, strategies and abilities, is a reflection of critical consciousness gained through the Photovoice process. Realizing that their own decisions, attitudes, and actions have enabled them to recover and heal from trauma was a significant outcome enabled by Photovoice. These points explicitly connect the relationship between Photovoice and an enhanced self-awareness about the topic of study.

Challenges Implementing Photovoice

Up to this point, we have reflected on the ways in which Photovoice enhances the richness of data collected and helps participants develop critical consciousness, two important ways in which the method contributes to a more just, peaceful, and inclusive society. However, based on the lessons learned in the pilot project, we saw that Photovoice also poses challenges for research. We noticed four challenges when implementing Photovoice in this pilot project.

First, while the combination of photos and interviews in most cases elicited rich participant responses, not all did. Once participants have a basic orientation to their project, including the goals of the project overall and prompts to help them take photos, participants are afforded the freedom to determine how they will respond to the prompts and narrate their photos during interviews. This can result in unpredictable outcomes that do not always produce useable data. For example, one participant in this project produced some photos and comments that did not clearly relate to the topic of study. While the images and stories recounted situations from her life, they were not transparently related to resilience. While it is possible, perhaps likely, that the photos and interview comments were connected to resilience for her, she was not able to clearly express the link. The challenge here is that participant data may not be always be useable or straightforward to interpret during analysis.

Second, participants shared that knowing they would have to explain their photos representing ideas such as strength, health, or personal growth was challenging. Participants noted that they had never before been asked to reflect about their resilience as a response to the trauma of being trafficked. Additionally, none of the participants had tried to envision their resilience as an image. One participant invested so much time and effort into her thoughts about resilience, she reported practicing what she would say at home before coming to the individual interview. This suggests that the process of thinking and picture taking, plus the resulting insights were so important and meaningful to

her that spent time to ensure a clear presentation. The process of connecting prompts-to-photos-to-talk, which can enable participants to identify deep and meaningful insights about the topic of study, is a challenging one.

Third, participants may have a range of language proficiency that can limit their participation in individual and group interviews. In this project, while the first author had spoken proficiency in English and Spanish, one participant natively spoke another language and had limited English proficiency. As a result, during the individual interview, the researcher was limited in her ability to fully understand the relationships among the prompt, photos, and narratives. Participants with a range of language proficiency should ideally have multi-lingual teams to conduct initial trainings of photo techniques & conducting interviews.

Finally, Photovoice is a method that requires access to a certain amount of resources including devices with which to take photos, such as a smart phone, digital camera, or film camera; methods to transfer photos to the researcher, such as text messages, e-mail, or traditional film developing; methods to store, anonymize, and share photos, such as hard drive space, secure web folders; and software to manipulate the metadata and manipulate images, such as Adobe Photoshop or equivalent. Thus, financial resources may be needed for participant stipends, printing photos, and the costs of an exhibit if one is part of the research design.

Discussion

Results from the pilot Photovoice project strongly suggest that Photovoice is ideally situated to provide access to the knowledge and perspectives of vulnerable populations, such as survivors of human trafficking. Especially if implemented with a trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approach, Photovoice can minimize the risk of re-traumatization for participants, and can also offer benefits such as increased self-awareness and an enhanced self-concept related to the topic of study for participants. Photovoice empowers participants by maximizing their choices and control, something that is especially important for survivors considering the complete lack of power and choice they experienced while being trafficked. In addition, a resilience orientation coupled with the self-reflection inherent to Photovoice can be especially helpful for survivors in their healing journey. Realizing how their strengths and abilities contribute to their resilience can support survivors' recovery from the trauma of human trafficking.

Results from Photovoice studies can also contribute in unique and valuable ways to general knowledge about the experience of human trafficking. Photovoice generates rich data in which the perspectives of people with lived experience are highlighted, which aligns with calls for more inclusive and collaborative human trafficking research (Hounmenou, 2020). Lived experience is a unique type of expertise, increasingly seen as a valid and important source that expands our knowledge (Frechette et al., 2020). Scholars and activists argue that it is impossible to understand the phenomena of human trafficking without understanding the lived experience and knowledge of survivors (Dang, 2018; Lockyer, 2020; Powers & Paul, 2018). Photovoice can be a useful tool for generating such data. Coupling photos and talk enables participants to access and express abstract ideas they could not do with words alone, providing unique insights into their experience in synergistic ways. Survivors' knowledge about human trafficking can be accessed with Photovoice, and then shared with stakeholders and the public through articles and exhibits. A Photovoice exhibit is a uniquely accessible way for stakeholders to deepen their understanding about human trafficking. While Photovoice, like any research method, has limitations, it can offer valuable contributions to research seeking to understand and find solutions for the crime of human trafficking.

Implications for Future Photovoice Research

Practitioners of Photovoice can benefit from the lessons learned in this pilot study by considering and implementing the guidance offered in Table 4 (Sandelowski and Lee, 2012). An increased awareness of

Table 4. Advice for Practitioners when Applying Photovoice.**Overall Research Design**

Employ a Trauma-Informed research approach. Seek to minimize trauma for participants by maximizing their choices and control in the research design and process.

Take a Resilience-Oriented approach to research design. Maximize opportunities to benefit participants by making their strengths, abilities and progress the focus of study. Do not explore participants' past trauma as the focus of inquiry.

Expect less control as the researcher, which means more work, and more uncertainty than other types of research. But, be thoughtful about how much control you need to retain to get your question answered and accomplish your goal/s

Be ethical: reimburse for time/effort, maintain confidentiality, assess emotional suitability, have clear expectations and boundaries.

Participants and Participation

Expect uneven participation and prepare for lots of coaxing and reminders to get participants to send/share photos, and to show up for interviews and meetings.

Understand that participants have likely experienced chronic and multiple traumas that are not always directly resulting from human trafficking.

Understand that participants likely will not care or be as invested in the topic of study and process as you are. They are living their lives. You are conducting research.

Thoughts about Photovoice

Be clear on the product/s that will result from the research: a scholarly article? An exhibit?

Work backwards from product/s you want by considering, for example:

- Technology: what quality image do you need to for a crisp, clear, blown up photo for an exhibit? What quality image is required by scholarly journals for publication? What type of camera (smart phone cameras or disposable film) will get you the results you need?
- The project's goal: consider what you want to accomplish (awareness? Policy change? Programmatic evaluation?). This impacts the research design (research question/s, level of participation in research process) and target audience for an exhibit and/or dissemination.

Resources: Photovoice requires some resources, including researcher/s time and labor, stipends and food for participants, photo printing, display and exhibit fees.

Analysis: Expect a wide range of photo and interview response types, which can impact analysis.

Expect the unexpected and be flexible: participants will take photos and talk about them in ways you cannot foresee.

Be prepared for disclosure of trauma and emotions in the interviews and group meetings. Provide (or refer to) mental health support for participants, if needed.

Be prepared to reflect upon and support participants' insights and self-awareness about positive growth in their lives.

project design strategies, and potential challenges when engaging with participants that may be gleaned from the advice in Table 4 can save participants time, effort, and frustration. Further, understanding the value and benefits of pairing Photovoice with a trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approach can set the stage for research that is more inclusive, just, and peaceful.

Human trafficking service providers and advocates may find Photovoice to be a useful tool for engaging with survivors to elicit their perspectives. Service providers could implement a Photovoice project to investigate client perspectives about services. Doing so can both help service providers to better understand how clients think and feel about the services, and also help clients to engage in self-reflection that leads to enhanced awareness. Policy advocates may engage survivors in a Photovoice project to explore their ideas about policies and systems which impact human trafficking, in order to better inform interventions and policies. Finally, a Photovoice project can help to access the unique knowledge and insights of survivors to provide both a rationale and impetus to stimulate needed policy change through a photo exhibition targeting decision-makers. The Photovoice method is adaptable in a variety of ways: the topic, and timeframe of the study, as well as the number of participants, and level of participation can be adjusted. In sum, Photovoice offers unique advantages for exploring the knowledge and perspectives of survivors of human trafficking, as well as other vulnerable populations.

Limitations and Further Research

The reflections offered in this article are based on a study with a very small number ($n = 4$) of participants. It is likely that a larger Photovoice study with a wide range of survivor-participants would

provide more robust results and additional considerations. Also, future work could meaningfully explore the relationship among prompt, photos, and interview modality as directly related, symbolically related, or embedded in apparently unrelated talk. It may be of further methodological value to explore the differences between data generated by prompts and photos, and data that is embedded in unrelated participant talk.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first Photovoice study exploring resilience in adult survivors of human trafficking using Photovoice as a participatory research approach. Results confirm previous Photovoice literature highlighting the method's ability to both generate rich and nuanced data (Latz, 2017), and also to facilitate critical consciousness about the topic of study for participants (Carlson et al., 2006; Latz, 2017; Liebenberg, 2018; Teti et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2016). Findings support the use of Photovoice to access and reveal the ideas and realities of populations that often go unheard and unseen. Photovoice created space for participants to create knowledge and gain new awareness about resilience in their lives. The participatory nature of the method empowered participants to choose how they would generate and frame their ideas, giving access to important issues and topics that would not otherwise have been explored. By positioning participants as active agents in research, Photovoice enabled them to co-construct knowledge, and “move from being mere objects to acting as subjects of their own research process” (Maguire, 1987, p. 30).

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Declaration of Interest Statement

Neither author has a conflict of interest.

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