

Photovoice as a Participatory Evaluation Method: Evaluating a Collective Kitchen Program in Northern Ontario

Vivian Oystriick

Cambrian College, Greater Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

Sidney Shapiro

Dhillon School of Business, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Abstract: *This article describes the evaluation of a collective kitchen program that aimed to provide food education programming to young adults, economically vulnerable community members, and Indigenous families. Photovoice was used as a participatory evaluation method to gain more insight into the impact of the collective kitchen program on the lives of the participants. Photovoice is a research approach that allows people in a community to express their views, concerns, or experiences on issues that are important to them. The objective was to give participants an opportunity to “speak” through photographs about how participating in the program impacted their lives. Photovoice allowed us to capture the true extent of the program’s impact, and ultimately, it became a meaningful and powerful way to help us better understand each participant’s experiences and connect with the issues that created barriers to healthy eating.*

Keywords: *photovoice, participatory methods, collective kitchen, program evaluation*

Résumé : *Le présent article décrit l'évaluation d'un programme de cuisine collective visant à offrir de la programmation sur l'alimentation à de jeunes adultes, à des membres de la communauté économiquement s et à des familles autochtones. La méthode photovoice a été utilisée comme méthode d'évaluation participative pour en savoir plus sur l'impact du programme de cuisine collective sur les vies des personnes participantes. Il s'agit d'une approche de recherche qui permet aux membres d'une communauté d'exprimer leurs points de vue, leurs préoccupations ou leurs expériences de sujets qui les touchent. L'objectif est de donner aux personnes participantes l'occasion de « parler » par l'intermédiaire de photographies au sujet de l'effet du programme sur leurs vies. Photovoice nous a permis de capturer la vraie portée de l'impact du programme et, au bout du compte, a été un outil important pour nous permettre de mieux comprendre l'expérience de chaque personne participante et de cerner les obstacles à une alimentation saine.*

Corresponding author: Vivian Oystriick, 1400 Barry Downe Rd, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, P3A 3V8; vivian.oystriick@cambriancollege.ca.

Mots clés : *cuisine collective, évaluation de programme, méthode de participation, photovoice*

BACKGROUND

The authors were hired to support a non-profit organization in Northern Ontario in evaluating their collective kitchen program. The organization offers numerous prevention programs and is situated in a high-priority neighbourhood. The organization received funding to offer the collective kitchen program for three distinct populations: youth, economically vulnerable families, and Indigenous families. The organization ran many iterations of the program each year for a period of three years. The groups ranged in size from six to eight participants who met twice weekly for five weeks.

Our evaluation strategy for the collective kitchen program embraced a non-experimental multi-method approach that included quantitative (analysis of survey data), qualitative (thematic analysis of focus groups), and participatory methods (photovoice). This approach allowed us to understand and document the program processes and outcomes fully. The evaluation looked at the participant's experience of the program and offered insights about the program's impact using multiple modes of inquiry. The authors have focused this article on the use of photovoice specifically because, through this process, we discovered that there is a dearth of literature that describes how to implement photovoice as a participatory evaluation method.

PHOTOVOICE AS AN EVALUATION METHOD

There are many documented benefits to participating in collective kitchen programs, including improved cooking skills, learning how to make affordable recipes, learning to work as part of a team, and reduced isolation among low-income community members (Farmer, Touchton-Leonard, & Ross, 2018; Ibrahim, Honein-AbouHaidar, & Jomaa, 2019). Photovoice was included in the evaluation plan as the organization wanted to capture data in a meaningful way for the participants. They also wanted to contextualize the impact of the program on the lives of the participants in their homes and in the community.

Photovoice as an evaluation method can provide marginalized community members with a unique opportunity to communicate their perspectives to a variety of audiences, thus empowering participants as valued stakeholders in the program (Hunter, Leeburg, & Harnar, 2020). Typically, photovoice is used as an evaluation method by incorporating the participant's perspective using photographs and narratives in response to a question or prompt that asks participants to identify the key changes that have occurred in their homes or communities as a result of the program initiative (Kramer et al., 2013).

Researchers who have studied photovoice as a program evaluation method have demonstrated its usefulness for a variety of populations and have shown it

to improve the quality and validity of findings (Halsall & Forneris, 2016; Krutt, Dyer, Arora, Rollman, & Jozkowski, 2018). This is especially true for programs engaging young people. Recent research with young people suggests that traditional qualitative methods are not ideal for capturing youth perspectives and experiences, but rather, visual methods offer a more authentic way to engage youth in program evaluation (Exner-Cortens, Sitter, Van Bavel, & Wright, 2022). Additionally, photovoice methodology can support programs that aim to encourage teen empowerment by allowing the participants to have a voice (Koren & Mottola, 2023).

Photovoice as a methodology is being increasingly used to study issues related to food disparities and obstacles faced by low-income households (Shannon, Borron, Kurtz, & Weaver, 2021; Soma, Li, & Shulman, 2022). In a study conducted by Lardeau, Healey, and Ford (2011), photovoice was used to document factors and explore issues related to food consumption and security for users of a community food program in Iqaluit Nunavut. Photovoice was found to be valuable in the gathering and sharing of research data. This research approach also met the needs of the community, who identified that the historical divide between researchers and the community in Nunavut resulted in a lack of meaningful data collection. More recently, Chappell et al. (2024) used photovoice to explore solutions for improvement of food security in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. Photographs from parents and carers provided their unique perspectives on how to improve food security for their families and gave them an opportunity to advocate for solutions and become agents of change.

Furthermore, photovoice as an evaluation method has been proven suitable for individuals who live with disability and who have historically been under-represented as evaluation participants because standardized data collection methods have not been accessible to these populations (Seed, 2016). For marginalized families living in high-priority neighbourhoods, using the participatory visual method of photovoice can contribute to understanding the program impact of participants at the community level (Carpenter, 2022), and it can provide valuable information to improve program processes and outcomes (Hunter et al., 2020). Lastly, if done correctly, photovoice can offer an equitable and responsive approach to research and evaluation (Golden, 2020).

THE PHOTOVOICE PROCESS

Photovoice was used as a retrospective evaluation method whereby participants were asked to identify key changes that they felt had occurred as a result of their participation in the collective kitchen program. Participants who had previously participated in the program were recruited via an information flyer by the organization. Participants were offered a \$50 food card for their participation. Seven participants consented to participate in the project. The participants were recruited from the community group or Indigenous group. All the participants lived in high-priority neighbourhoods. As non-Indigenous evaluators, we

acknowledged our position in the evaluation and recognized the history of non-Indigenous researchers conducting research on Indigenous populations. To support cultural safety, we communicated that photovoice (as a method) was selected by the organization as a collaborative approach to evaluation and that photographs would be given back to the participants and the organization to determine how best to disseminate that knowledge. We also had been working with the organization for many years and had developed positive and trusting relationships with the organization and community. Additionally, we tried to be as transparent as possible by providing information detailing what they could expect throughout the process prior to the first meeting. The process was composed of three phases.

In the first phase, participants were introduced to the photovoice project and were brought together as a group to meet one another. During this first meeting, the project's purpose was explained to participants, and they were shown how to use the digital cameras they were given. The evaluators reviewed the ethical considerations when taking pictures and discussed group rules and guidelines. The research question was then developed with the participants. The group decided to take pictures that captured how their participation in the program impacted their meal planning and preparation. Participants were sent home with the cameras (and extra batteries) and given three weeks to take pictures. Before departing, a second meeting time was coordinated with the participants, and they were provided with the evaluator's contact information should they require support. The participants were encouraged to interpret the impact however they wanted and in a way that conveyed their thoughts and experiences about the program.

In the second phase, participants were asked to meet (one month after the first) to share their photos in a group dialogue session. A laptop was used to display the pictures taken from each camera. Each participant presented their photos and described the meaning of the photos to the group. The meeting was audio recorded and transcribed by the evaluators. Participants were then asked to select their two favourite photos for presentation at a community event displaying the findings. The evaluators supported the participants in writing a short caption that described their photos. This would be placed next to their photos at the community event (see [Figure 1](#)). The participants agreed to present their photos at the organization's annual fundraising gala a few months later. Notably, all the participants returned with their cameras and pictures taken. We did not experience attrition during this process.

In the project's third phase, the selected photos were developed by the evaluators (11 × 14 inches) and given to the organization to be framed. A summary of the photos and discussion was also written and provided to the organization for funding purposes. Due to circumstances and restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization could not host the fundraising gala. As an alternative method of disseminating the findings, the evaluators created a digital booklet illustrating the participants' photos and captions. The organizations



Figure 1. Participant photo and caption: “I created something I would buy in a restaurant for less than transportation to the restaurant. I made chicken wings. I baked them in the oven and then sautéed them with garlic parmesan sauce. I cooked this meal for \$7. I also got more comfortable with meat. I would never have bought wings before. Having that one-on-one help in a program can change someone’s life.”

could then share the digital booklet with key stakeholders and present the photos and findings with their board members and funders using Zoom. The evaluators followed up with each participant to let them know how the photos were being shared, and each participant received copies of their photographs.

REFLECTIONS

Consistent with other program evaluations, we found that photovoice as a participatory evaluation method added significant value to the overall evaluation process. First, it added validity and credibility to the focus group findings. For example, participants spoke about how the program taught them new skills related to cooking, budgeting, and food safety. They also spoke about how it changed how they eat and make choices around food preparation. One participant spoke about how, if not for this program, she would not eat any healthy food. These findings were consistent with themes developed from the analysis of the focus group data. Photovoice, as a qualitative component of the evaluation, enriched the data by capturing visual narratives and providing context and emotions that enhanced our understanding of the program’s impact.

Second, using the photovoice methodology allowed us to gather meaningful data relevant to the participants’ lived experiences that would not have been captured otherwise. For example, one participant took a picture of her and her father cooking in his kitchen. She said the program gave her a new way to spend time



Figure 2. Participant photo and caption: “The collective kitchen taught me how to make a healthy meal at little or no cost.”

with her father, as they were now cooking meals together. This same participant stated that the program taught her how to cook healthy foods on a budget (see [Figure 2](#)). Many participants took pictures of the meals they prepared for their families on their own. They spoke of these meals when sharing their photos in the group discussion. This provided evidence for increased self-sufficiency and their ability to apply the knowledge and skills they learned from the program. Perhaps the most impactful moment was when one participant shared a picture of the first meal she made herself. She said that she never cooked for herself until she took the program and only ate “junk food.” Not only did photovoice demonstrate her ability to cook meals, but it also allowed her to share her success and celebrate it with others. Lastly, this photovoice process fostered community engagement and collaboration by involving community members in the evaluation and documentation process. This builds a sense of ownership and responsibility among participants. All the participants stated that they enjoyed being a part of the photovoice project and that they were proud of their accomplishments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When working with marginalized groups, it is important to consider several factors if using photovoice as an evaluation method. First, evaluators must consider the social inequalities faced by the participants they are working with. Evaluators must ensure that they are able to provide cameras and all technical equipment required by the participants. Evaluators should spend sufficient time teaching the participants how to use the cameras and allowing them to practice taking pictures with support. A “how to” guide or video should be provided to the participants so they can refer to these once they are home and using the camera on their own. Several of our participants indicated that despite being shown how to use the camera, they forgot once at home and lost pictures that they did not save.

During the initial meeting, the importance of informed consent when taking photographs of other individuals must be discussed in detail. In this case, consent forms were given to participants to allow them to photograph family members or friends; however, several of them did not remember to have their family members or friends sign or lost the consent form. Without consent, the pictures could not be used. Participants were also asked not to take pictures of strangers in the grocery store or in the community. All the participants complied with this request.

Evaluators should also consult with the participants on the time needed to take the photos. Initially, a two-week time period was discussed with our participants, but they requested to have more time to take their photos. This allowed the participants to buy groceries for the photos, as many needed transportation to the grocery store or lived on a fixed budget. Participants should also be encouraged to take as many or as few pictures as they want to answer the evaluation question. It is important to let participants know that they will not be evaluated on the quality of their pictures, as this will ease any fears they have about getting the right picture. To adhere to the principles of participatory research, the participants should be included in as many aspects of the evaluation process as possible, including defining the evaluation question, interpreting the question, collecting the data through photographs, and selecting the photos to be used for the analysis and presentation.

Lastly, evaluators must recognize the importance of relationships in engaging marginalized groups and be intentional about building positive relationships and earning trust when using photovoice as a method. Additionally, evaluators must also critically acknowledge their social location, power, and privilege when working with Indigenous communities. This awareness helps in mitigating power imbalances, promoting equity, and honoring the unique contexts and knowledge systems of the communities being evaluated.

CONCLUSION

Photovoice has the potential to be a powerful and innovative tool in program evaluation, and it offers advantages that traditional methods often lack. By empowering participants to visually express their experiences and perspectives, photovoice enhances the depth and richness of data, capturing nuanced aspects of a program's impact that may be overlooked through traditional methods. This participatory approach fosters a sense of ownership and engagement among stakeholders, promoting more authentic and representative findings. Additionally, the visual nature of photovoice appeals to diverse audiences, making evaluation results more accessible and compelling. Ultimately, the integration of photovoice into program evaluation not only strengthens the rigor and validity of assessments, but when used in conjunction with other evaluation methods, it can provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact.

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CONTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

Vivian Oystrick is a Cambrian College professor specializing in interdisciplinary human studies, social work, and academic research. Her career includes extensive experience in teaching, management, and research as the Northern Hub Research and Evaluation Manager at Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0170-0423>. Email: vivian.oystrick@cambriancollege.ca

Sidney Shapiro is an assistant professor of data analytics at the University of Lethbridge, researching the areas of program evaluation data science, business analytics, and machine learning. His expertise spans research, teaching, and consulting, focusing on developing data-driven solutions and automating data tools to enhance business efficiency and effectiveness. Email: sidney.shapiro@uleth.ca