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PhotoVoice as Authentic Civic Engagement: Lessons Learned in One Immigrant Community

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that equitable and sustainable public policy can only be achieved when it is informed by the concerns, hopes, and experiences of those who are affected. Public agencies wishing to engage recent immigrants can find this to be challenging, however. Effective public participation and civic engagement can be difficult when community members cannot speak English and/or come from very different cultural and political environments. The Chronic Disease Prevention Program (CDPP) of the Multnomah County Health Department and Metro, two public agencies serving the Portland, Oregon region, have actively sought to learn from the experiences of immigrant community members.

Concerned about the obesity epidemic among youth, especially in Latino populations where obesity rates are particularly high (National Survey of Children's Health, 2007), the Multnomah County CDPP was awarded a 5-year grant from the Northwest Health Foundation to engage in a participatory research and education project, the Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) initiative, to gain a deeper understanding of the root causes of poor nutrition and inactivity in a community of recent Latino immigrants in north Portland and to provide them with healthy eating and active living education and opportunities.

For this initiative, the CDPP adopted a socio-ecological model of health that recognizes that human behavior is a product of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, environmental, and policy influences (Naylor et al., 2006); the project was specifically designed to address all of these dimensions. It was hoped that the education and skill development offered by the project would not only lead to individual behavior change but that the HEAL initiative's strategies would influence larger community norms and affect policy change (Everett et al., 2009).

In 2006, the CDPP formed the HEAL Coalition, consisting of staff and parents at Clarendon Elementary School in north Portland, Multnomah County health workers, researchers (the Center for Health and Social Inequality Research (CHSIR) at Portland State University), the Latino Alliance, North Portland Neighborhood Services, Kaiser Permanente, and policymakers to guide this 5-year effort.

Metro is the Portland metropolitan area's elected regional government. It is tasked with providing planning, policy-making, and services to preserve and enhance the region's quality of life (Metro, 2010). Chief among its responsibilities is the oversight of the Portland metropolitan urban growth boundary (UGB), a legal requirement under

Oregon's statewide planning system. Metro describes itself as a "regional roundtable where leaders, experts and the people of the region come together to shape our future" (Metro, 2010). Underlying Metro's public engagement effort is Oregon's Statewide Planning Goal #1 that mandates public participation and states that "[t]he citizen involvement program shall involve a cross-section of affected citizens in all phases of the planning process" (OAR 660-015-0000(1)). Historically, Metro has found it particularly challenging to achieve meaningful engagement of a true "cross-section" of the public.

In an effort to bring affected community members to the table, Metro has, over the years, initiated significant public engagement efforts. Most recently, with the rapid increase in the number of Latinos in the region (Hispanics – the applicable category used by the Census Bureau – made up 10.5 percent of the population in the Portland-Vancouver MSA in 2008 according to the American Community Survey), Metro, like Multnomah County's CDPP, has sought ways to effectively engage and learn from newly arrived Latino community members.

At the suggestion of North Portland Neighborhood Services, a partner in the HEAL Coalition, a group of Portland State University (PSU) Senior Capstone students submitted a grant proposal to Metro's Neighborhood Enhancement Grant program in spring of 2007 to support a PhotoVoice project intended to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers to healthy eating and active living that the HEAL participants were experiencing. Prior efforts that had focused on analyzing the physical attributes of place were seen as inadequate by the CDPP. It was hoped that a qualitative approach, like Photovoice, that would turn the research over to those who were affected could provide real insight into how these community members saw their world. Metro was intrigued by the proposal not just because of the merits of the Coalition's work in north Portland but because it wanted to learn more about a potentially valuable public engagement tool for its own use. The grant was awarded in late 2007 and the Photovoice project began in January 2008.

What follows is a more detailed discussion of the rationale for choosing Photovoice for the HEAL initiative, some of the challenges we faced in recruiting participants for the project, a description of the PhotoVoice methodology (specifically the stages of the Photovoice process and how it worked in this case), some examples of the products and findings of the Photovoice project, and concludes with lessons learned including some long term implications of this approach.

Clarendon at Portsmouth/James John Photovoice Rationale

In 2007, the Multnomah County CDPP partnered with the PSU Senior Capstone program to enhance its HEAL Coalition work by exploring, using geographic data and geographic information systems (GIS) technology, potential physical barriers (a lack of sidewalks and crosswalks, access to public transportation, the presence of parks and play equipment, access to full-service grocery stores, and the presence of convenience stores and fast food restaurants) to healthy living in north Portland.

The findings of this research indicated that although there was a need for crosswalks, sidewalks, and sidewalk repairs in some areas, pedestrian infrastructure was relatively robust in these neighborhoods relative to the city as a whole. Similarly, parks and playgrounds were found to be reasonably well equipped and distributed throughout north Portland. The research also indicated that, unlike some low-income neighborhoods, full-service grocery stores were as accessible to the residents of north Portland as in much of the rest of the city (generally within one-half mile of most residents) and yet, the County health workers engaged in the HEAL initiative were aware that many Latino community members were taking public transportation many miles outside of the neighborhood to shop for food at great inconvenience to them. The HEAL Coalition had assumed that physical access to healthy eating and active living opportunities in this low income area of Portland was a key factor in the health of the Latino families living there. These findings, however, indicated that there were other factors that were not well understood.

The Multnomah County Health Department had previously engaged in a Photovoice effort with youth to examine health and that experience suggested that the method's emphasis on imagery had the potential to overcome the barrier of language, given the fact that many of the HEAL Coalition family members did not speak English.

Photovoice, a participatory research method developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, has three main goals: (1) to enable participants to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns; (2) to promote critical dialogue about individual and community concerns through the use of the photographs; and (3) to enable community researchers to reach policymakers (Wang, 1999). Because these goals aligned with the County's desire to engage community members in self-discovery as well as empower them to change behavior and influence policy, this method appeared to be a good fit.

With the funding from Metro's North Portland Neighborhood Enhancement grant, the HEAL Clarendon at Portsmouth/James John Photovoice project was initiated in January 2008. Latino parents from Clarendon and James John elementary schools (the HEAL initiative was active in these two schools at this point) were invited to explore what they perceived to be barriers to health in their daily lives. They were to become the researchers, develop the findings, and present their findings to policymakers. Approximately eight parents participated in the project. The work was facilitated by PSU graduate student, Angie Mejia with assistance from Olivia Quiroz (a Multnomah County health worker at James John Elementary School) and Yolanda Morales (a Portland Public Schools health worker at Clarendon Elementary School), as well as a group of PSU Senior Capstone students. The project began in January, 2008 and was concluded in March 2008.

Photovoice Project Recruitment Challenges

While research looking at the electoral and non-electoral civic participation of Latino immigrants is steadily emerging (De Garza et al., 1996), questions still remain about effective processes of engaging Latino communities in civic participation (Rodriguez,

1997). A study by Leal et al. (2002) indicates significant differences between the rates of Latino citizens (those who are born U.S. citizens or those who became citizens via naturalization) and Latino non-citizens (Leal et al., 2002). The former have higher rates of participation in both electoral and non-electoral (community-based or agency-based volunteerism, for example) than the latter (Leal et al., 2002). For those Latino non-citizens with more tenuous immigration statuses, participation in any activity that may resemble political involvement may be scarce due anxiety caused by their immigrant U.S. status or other factors (such as age, English language dominance, or knowledge of U.S. politics). In addition, Leal et al. (2002) indicate that a portion of these Latino non-citizens may not be aware of how the individual can influence civic matters, thus distancing them from participation in any form of political activity. Such individualistic ideas of political engagement may seem foreign and inaccessible to communities where engagement is clearly divided by race and class.

Other studies looking at civic participation situate U.S. views of volunteerism as a public matter, while immigrant Latinos may see volunteerism in a very different light. Hobbs (2001) indicates that the idea of “helping others” is at the core of the immigrant experience. U.S. immigrants maintain close social networks that allow them to establish a distinctly Latino existence that helps newer arrivals adapt to the community. These networks of immigrant reciprocity, constituted of family and close friends, often alleviate the economic constraints that they face as U.S. newcomers. It is in these situations and context that newly arrived Latinos build their definition and understanding of civic participation. It was in this context that the Multnomah County CDPP began its HEAL initiative in north Portland.

Early in the Photovoice recruitment process, Latina immigrant mothers who were participating in Promotoras de Salud (the HEAL Coalition’s health promotion program) mirrored some of these findings: they doubted that they could do research much less influence public officials. Their initial assent to participate in the PhotoVoice project was a result of the trust that Quiros and Morales had established with the community and was not necessarily seen as a way to create change in the community. At the outset, they were quick to indicate that their lack of experience with how U.S. citizens see and do politics distanced them from participating in anything related to local politics.

Kevin Neuhouser (1995) states that civic engagement focused on community infrastructure benefits have been disproportionately made up of women. Participation in the demands of daily existence (food, water, schooling) have “...underlying gendered qualities that motivate women to overcome... barriers...” (ibid, 39). Their role as mothers drives their participation, not their gendered interests or gendered agendas. In the case of our participants, they may also have been driven to participate out of past engagement with school lunch and nutrition issues and not out of a feminist viewpoint or a feminist political standpoint. It is the case that all of the participants ended up being female and most, initially, became engaged because of the discussion, driven by Promotoras de Salud, they were already having related to school meal nutrition concerns.

Photovoice Method: Stages and Application

Wang breaks down the Photovoice process into a number of stages. However, it is assumed that adaptations or adjustments will occur depending on the circumstances. What follows is an outline of the key Photovoice stages and a brief description of how we approached them.

Conceptualizing the problem. Key to a successful Photovoice project is the identification of an issue deemed important enough by the participants to explore. Related to this is some level of shared understanding of the issue. In this case, Multnomah County had been working with the Photovoice participants for more than a year to educate them about issues of health in their language and building trust. By the time the project was initiated, the participants had a clear understanding of the social determinants of health and how factors in their daily lives could affect their health. They saw that issue as important but soon understood that Photovoice would offer them to expand their exploration into other determinants of health.

Defining broader goals and objectives. The Multnomah County CDPP's goals and objectives, as stated previously, were in alignment with the theoretical underpinnings of the Photovoice methodology in the sense that the process was meant to provide insights to the County related to the challenges to health that these new residents faced, insights to the participants about the challenges they together face, empowerment of the participants to make changes in their lives, and influence policy. Although the County designed the HEAL Coalition work to be participatory from the outset, it could be argued that the primary agenda, in terms of goals and objectives, initially came from the County but was later embraced by the community.

Recruiting policymakers as the audience for Photovoice findings. Prior to the decision to utilize Photovoice in its HEAL initiative, the CDPP had adopted a participatory approach that necessitated the formation of a coalition to guide the work that was made up of key stakeholders including policymakers. Thus, an audience for the Photovoice findings was already in place. However, since the conclusion of the Photovoice project and because of the nature of its findings, the County has sought to reach beyond the HEAL Coalition membership.

Training the trainers and conducting Photovoice training. Training of the participants for this project consisted of technical, conceptual, and cultural elements.

The technical training focused on the use of the digital cameras that had been purchased for the project. The PSU Senior Capstone students developed training materials in English and Spanish and provided demonstrations of camera use for the participants.

The conceptual aspect of the training related to how to explore an issue or problem through the lens of a camera. Although we allowed some time for the participants to “play” with picture-taking (photographing each other and their families), we instructed them in the use of the cameras as a way of recording their stories and observations,

stressing the importance of “framing” what they saw. Mejia, who provided facilitation for the project, introduced the participants to the process of doing research and the importance of their participation as the researchers.

Mejia also introduced the PSU students to potential cultural sensitivities that they might encounter since they were likely to be perceived as “outsiders” by the participating parents. Both the PSU students and Mejia prepared themselves for the process by familiarizing themselves with the Photovoice literature, training materials, and examples available online.

Taking pictures. Metro’s Neighborhood Enhancement grant allowed for the purchase two digital cameras that were shared by the participants. This wasn’t difficult since they lived near each other and attended HEAL functions at the same schools. The participants took photographs over a period of approximately four weeks and a series of weekly meetings occurred during this time to download the photos and to discuss them. None of the participants experienced any difficulty using the cameras or successfully capturing meaningful photographs.

It is important to note that some of the issues that the participants thought were particularly important involved vandalism and gangs. Our participants were instructed to do their photography in the public realm or their own homes. Several of the participants photographed evidence of vandalism including the tags of an especially brutal El Salvadoran gang. This was the story that our participants felt was important to tell but we wondered if they had put themselves at risk.

Facilitating group discussion. There were several factors that contributed to the success of the group discussion. These include trust, the size of the group (six to eight participants at any one time), the skill and experience of the facilitator, and the ability to provide immediate gratification in terms of seeing the fruits of their labor from session to session.

Building trust between the health workers engaged in the Clarendon-Portsmouth HEAL project and the participating community members was always seen as essential by the CDPP. Quiroz and Morales had been working with the Coalition since its inception and had built the foundation of trust in the community that made the authentic nature of the project possible.

It was decided, in order to maximize the experience of group discussion, to engage a facilitator who was skilled at conducting focus groups, was a native Spanish speaker, and had experience in a focus group setting with a similar population. Mejia was completing a master’s degree in sociology at PSU for which she had facilitated a number of focus groups with recent Latino immigrants. Because of her training and experience, even though she was technically an “outsider” to the HEAL Coalition, she was able to quickly gain the trust of the participants and successfully transfer the role of researcher/expert to the participants.

In addition, to maintain the momentum of the process, having digital photographs (rather than photographic prints from conventional cameras) enabled us to provide immediate gratification by downloading the images to computers at each meeting and projecting them at a very large scale for all to see. The projected images generated great excitement.

Critical reflection and dialogue, selecting photographs for captioning, and codifying issues. During each session, the photographers talked about the rationale behind each photograph they took and engaged the others in discussion. Over the six-week period of sharing the photographs and discussion, several clear themes naturally emerged. These include issues related to economic development, crime, loss of community related to a school closure (Clarendon Elementary School was officially closed by Portland Public Schools summer of 2007 and moved to the Portsmouth Middle School location – hence, Clarendon at Portsmouth), inadequate public transportation, and the quality of school meals. The participants then reviewed all of the photographs to select those that best conveyed each issue. This was a relatively painless process since each participant's work was represented in the final selection. The selected photographs were then formally captioned. Typically, the individuals who took the selected photograph provided the caption – often with input from the group.

Documenting the stories. The captioning process was assisted by Quiroz who took notes during the often rapid-fire conversation in Spanish on her laptop computer. She recorded the wording of the captions and translated them into English. The captioned photographs were compiled into a Powerpoint presentation and printed as posters to share with the HEAL Coalition members and other venues. In addition, the PSU Senior Capstone students created a website (http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/Photovoice08/PhotoVoice_WebRoot/) of the Photovoice findings to allow for broader dissemination.

Reaching policymakers, donors, media, and others who may be able to effect change. The participants presented their findings to the HEAL Coalition members at the conclusion of the project in spring 2008. It is important to keep in mind that most of the participants had come from countries where civic participation is not the norm. None of them had ever stood up in front of 40 plus public officials, community leaders, and policymakers before and some expressed reservations about having to do this. Surely, the presentation was something that Mejia, Quiroz, or Morales would do. We turned it into a celebration and brought in a translator to provide real time translation in English of their presentation for the audience.

The willingness of the participants to stand before a rather intimidating audience and their heartfelt comments along with the power of the imagery and the captions made a huge impression on the audience. The Multnomah County CDPP concluded the presentation with a prioritization exercise in which the Coalition members determined the issues that they thought should rise to the top of the Coalition's work based on their importance and feasibility. Many in the audience wanted to know how they could help to move these issues forward.

Following this presentation, the participants were interviewed in Spanish about their work on the project by a local public radio station, KBOO. They also presented their findings at a joint meeting of the Clarendon at Portsmouth and James John PTAs. In addition, Quiroz and Morales have shown the Powerpoint to a number interested groups and the imagery has proven to be both informative and provocative. The HEAL Coalition is using the results of this research to frame the agenda for the initiative and is currently seeking to ways to change policy around school meals and the impacts of school closures on surrounding communities.

The Power of Photovoice: Examples of Findings

The power of Photovoice lies in its process and the nature of the findings. The process is designed to transform community members not only from the subjects of research to researchers themselves but to enable them to be active participants in political dialogue. The photographs that convey the findings of the research have the power to communicate, independent of language, the issues being explored through the participants' eyes. The experience of captioning promotes dialogue among the participants as well as a sharpening of the issues at hand.

What follows are a few examples of the findings from the Clarendon at Portsmouth/James John Photovoice project that asked the participants to explore the barriers to health in their daily lives. While it could be said that many of the findings could have been obtained through the use of focus groups alone, the imagery provides additional "data points" that help to validate the findings. Moreover, with regard to the exploration of issues related to place, the photographs allow for a concrete connection to the experience of place that is missing in focus group settings.



Nosotros vemos señales de graffiti por todos lados hasta en las paradas de alto. Esto manda un mensaje a la juventud que existen muchas gangas en nuestra comunidad y nadie esta haciendo nada para controlar este problema.

“We see gang graffiti everywhere even in the stop signs. This sends a message to our youth that gangs are active in this community and that no one is doing anything to control this growing problem.”

Figure 1. Impact of gang activity.

Police records verify that there is significant gang activity in north Portland. Although the CDPP was aware of the problem, it wasn't clear, prior to the Photovoice project, how important the issue was in relationship to the participants' willingness to let their children play in the neighborhood parks and school grounds nor was it aware of the level of helplessness residents felt about it.



No me gusta por que hay muchas cantinas, hay cantinas y restaurantes en todo lo que es esta calle. Creo que por esto, St. Johns no le atrae a la gente, por que hay muchos bares. Cuando las personas salen de los bares... No es malo tener uno o dos bares, pero hay muchos en esta parte. Es un lugar histórico y una comunidad [St. Johns] familias no les gusta salir por que hay muchas cantinas.

I don't like the fact there are too many bars, it is restaurants and bars and bars all the way down the street. I think that is one of the reasons that [St Johns] it is not appealing, because there are too many bars, and when people come out of bars, its okay to have one or two but there are too many on this strip. It is a historical site and a community, families don't go out and see it because of the bars.

Figure 2. The presence of bars.

This photo generated a lively discussion not only about the problem of alcohol abuse in the participants' families but also the negative impression that the neighborhood's commercial center dominated by bars gives to their children and visiting friends. The caption suggests that if there were other kinds of shopping opportunities present, people would be willing to walk there to shop. They are looking for a sense of pride about their neighborhood.



La escuela de Clarendon ha estado abandonada desde junio del 2007. Los padres tiene preocupaciones y no están de acuerdo con lo que esta pasando. A nosotros nos gustaría saber quien lo va arreglar? Queremos que la reparen y pongan un centro comunitario, un gimnasio, o otro uso para la comunidad.

“Clarendon Elementary School has been left abandoned since July of 2007. Parents have many concerns with what is happening and want to know who is going to fix it? We want this school to get repaired and use for a community center or gym.”

Figure 3. The “abandoned” school.

Clarendon Elementary School was a low-income, predominantly Latino school in north Portland. Because of the declining school population in the district as a whole, Portland Public Schools closed Clarendon in 2007 and relocated the students to Portsmouth Middle School, about a half mile away. The principal at Clarendon had worked hard to build a sense of community at the old school. The Photovoice project revealed the profound sense of loss and “abandonment” that many of the Latino parents felt with the closure as they always referred to the closed school as “abandoned.” This was the place where parents had felt comfortable sending their kids to play but since the closure, the building and grounds have not been maintained and gangs inhabit the site.



“Aquí esta una parada de bus y la gente tira la basura. Nos critican a los Mexicanos, que somos sucios, y yo veo que es Americanos. Los veo desde mi ventana que estan tirando la basura. Muchas veces cuando hacen eso me pongo a recoger para que vean que no todos los Mexicanos somos, “sucios”, y que ellos tambien tienen personas que son sucias.”

“Here is a bus stop where people throw garbage. They criticize us Mexicans, saying that we are dirty, and I see that it is Americans. I see them through my window that they throw trash. Many times when they do that I start picking up so they can see that not all Mexicans are like they say, “dirty”, and that they too have people that are dirty.”

Figure 4. Prejudice.

Many of the photographs focused on the negative impressions conveyed by the large number of vacant lots, vandalism, and poorly maintained property and sidewalks in the neighborhood. But this image speaks powerfully to the issue of prejudice that many of the Latino residents experience in their daily lives.



El estante para bicicletas esta atrás de la escuela, y bastantes bicicletas han sido robadas.

In back of school "...bike rack is on the back and too many bikes are being stolen."

Figure 5. Stolen bicycles.

In discussing barriers to physical activity for their children, the participants immediately identified the low priority that the school had placed on bike riding to school evidenced by the location in the back of the school where the kids were supposed to park their bikes. Hidden from sight, bicycle theft was a major problem. Because of parent complaints, the school installed bike racks at the front of the school where they are more visible and less likely to be stolen. This was an early success of the Photovoice project.

Lessons Learned and Long-term Implications

In many respects, this was a very successful project. Although the use of the methodology wasn't anticipated when the HEAL initiative began, its goals, as a method, were well aligned with those of the County. The participants in the Photovoice project were able to record and reflect on their personal and community concerns related to barriers to health; they were able to not only engage in impassioned discussion about their experiences provoked by the photographs but they were able to utilize the photographs to engage in discussion with the larger community irrespective of language; and they were able to reach policymakers through the HEAL Coalition. Moreover, the process of grassroots participatory research that the Photovoice method enabled for the participants was transformative.

However, there are several important caveats to in keep in mind when considering this method as an addition to any public participation toolbox. They include:

- The importance of building trust prior to initiating Photovoice: The authenticity and power of this particular project largely rested on the trust that had been consciously developed between the HEAL sponsored health workers and the community members through the Promotoras de Salud program. Trust is always an issue when trying to effectively engage disenfranchised community members but it takes on a greater importance when dealing with immigrants whose political and social cultures breed suspicion. Quiroz and Morales are Latinas who had worked in the two schools for more than a year educating parents and kids about the social determinants of health before the Photovoice project began. The parents who participated in the project had a common understanding of the issues to be explored and knew from experience that they and their opinions would be respected.
- Time and resources: Clearly, building trust can take time and resources. The Northwest Health Foundation funded the HEAL initiative for five years in recognition of the fact that affecting behavior change takes time. Because of the appearance of the relative ease of execution and the potential sexiness of the imagery, Photovoice can be seductive to agencies struggling with effective public participation especially with non-English speakers. Our experience suggests that unless an agency has already built trust in the targeted communities or has the time and resources to do so, the results may lack the authenticity that legitimizes the process and findings.
- The importance of facilitation: Based the one year relationship that the CDDP had built in the community prior to the initiation of the Photovoice project, it was clear that in order to maintain the trust that been developed and enlist the full participation of the participants, the project would require a designated facilitator who would not be seen as an outsider or an authority figure. As a skilled focus group facilitator, Mejia was able to recede to the background while bringing the participants forward, making sure that everyone was heard. Mejia also brought to the table a personal understanding of what it is to be a Latina in this country as well as a knowledge and respect for the different national and cultural backgrounds that the participants brought to the table. As a result, she was immediately able to put the participants at ease with the process and act as a catalyst for lively discussion.
- Raising false expectations: By engaging previously disenfranchised community members in a process that encourages them to examine themselves and their communities and then express what they have found in public venues, particularly in front of policymakers, expectations for change develop that can lead to disappointment. The hope at the outset of the project was that the findings could produce some small successes that the participants could celebrate. That has happened to a limited degree (such as the relocation of the bicycle parking area at

Clarendon at Portsmouth School) but much of what they found, even where there is some level of political will to address an issue, has root causes that are very complex, are politically charged, and will require a substantial commitment of resources to resolve. Morales, in particular, who works on a daily basis with the participants has expressed concern as time goes on that the Photovoice participants will be disappointed if they don't see that action is being taken to address the issues that are so important to them. This, she fears, will make them less likely to participate in the future.

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