



## **Photovoice: Doing Assessed Research as an Undergraduate from a Critical Standpoint**

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## Abstract

In this case study, we will describe a psychology honours project which started with, but also problematised, the notion of 'lived experience' of being labelled 'mentally ill' and 'treated' within an Australian psychiatric hospital. The research method we used was *Photovoice*, a method which involves group members taking photos and using them as 'prompts' for telling their stories of 'lived experience'. This research project was theorised and conducted within a critical frame of reference, and therefore, we explicate what we mean by 'frame of reference' and 'critical' as well as describe how these contribute to the constitution of how we think, do research and perform ourselves. We will discuss how we deployed Photovoice and outline some issues we encountered in the everyday practice of doing a participatory and critical Photovoice research project. In doing so, we hope to demonstrate the potential of critical research as a tool of activist scholarship within assessed undergraduate studies in psychology.

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## Learning Outcomes

- To understand that research is conducted within a frame of reference and that whichever frame of reference is dominant will constitute how research is theorised and practised and knowledge claims constructed and warranted (legitimated)
  - To understand what it is to do a research project within a critical frame of reference including critical methodology implications
  - To provide an example of the everyday practice of doing critical research using the method Photovoice
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## Introduction

In this article, we set out to help you understand what it is to take a *critical* approach to methodology (theorised method) and thus to social science and to help you understand the everyday practice of doing research within a critical frame of reference.

All social scientific research is done within a *frame of reference*, which consists of an interrelated set of philosophical assumptions about what scientific knowledge is (epistemology), what there is in the world (ontology), how knowledge claims are actually constructed and legitimised (history of ideas, history of science and sociology of knowledge), how knowledge functions societally (ideology and politics of knowledge) and so on.

The frame of reference constituting mainstream social sciences is often positioned as the only defensible scientific frame of reference possible ('the scientific method') and is often taken for granted and therefore not explicated. The frame of reference of mainstream social sciences is,

however, often excavated, examined and critiqued by others outside it. They conclude that mainstream social sciences are often done within a frame of reference which is positivist and naive realist, with historical roots in the Enlightenment, and which positions social science as independent of political and social power.

Increasingly, the dominant framework of mainstream social research is being challenged by social scientists working within a frame of reference which is critical, social constructionist, with historical roots in post modernism and which positions social science as inescapably political and ideological. When we say 'critical', we mean committed to uncovering and challenging the interests served by particular ways of doing and legitimating social scientific knowledge-work, that is, the particular relations between versions of social science deployed and the social power exercised by particular interest groups. Our frame of reference is 'social constructionist' in that we think the 'real' only exists in the sense of being continually socially (re)manufactured, and our frame of reference is 'post-modern' in that we reject modernist/Enlightenment notions of progress. The frame of reference within which social science is framed determines methodological decisions affecting how social science research is done; here, 'methodology' means the theorising of method.

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### Methodology

*Photovoice* is a research *method* used by social scientists from diverse disciplines. It is a method which involves providing a camera and a space for co-researchers to tell what lies behind the taking of the photographs. However, before it can be used in any particular research project, it requires *methodological* warranting, that is, legitimation. The *frame of reference* within which Photovoice is theorised is *critical*.

Photovoice draws in part from the work of Paulo Freire's *critical consciousness* which assumes everyone has the capacity, with the right tools and collective processes, to critically reflect upon their social world, their place in it, their personal perceptions and all the contradictions within and between each. When using Photovoice, the stories and photographs are positioned as legitimate 'texts' for collective analysis to 'surface' (bring to the fore) the ideological, political and social rationalities and practices that maintain oppression. The political nature of Photovoice is also highlighted in its prioritising of processes which challenge power differentials usually inherent in the researcher/participant relationship and the prioritising of the interests of 'participants' (or 'co-researchers'). Photovoice also serves as a critical tool to deconstruct and challenge scientific knowledges, to rewrite histories, to provide an alternative to the interests of mainstream knowledge construction and warranting methods and to form a platform for political and social action.

Social science undergraduates are seldom encouraged to do research within a critical frame of reference, especially within a major assessed component of their degrees and especially within psychology, which tends to be dominated by a mainstream acritical frame of reference. Here, we report on a piece of research done within a critical frame of reference which constituted a major element of the honours year assessment of a psychology honours undergraduate student and which received a first class grade. The research was largely conceptualised, designed and carried out by psychology honours undergraduate Rose. David supervised Rose's research and contributed most evidently through introducing Rose to the community-based group, the method and its frame of reference and through supporting Rose in theorising and writing.

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### Research Context

We worked in a large Australian city with a diverse group of people who belonged to a 'community group', although the members characterised the group in differing ways: as a group of 'survivors of psychiatry', a peer support group for 'consumers' of mental health services or people with 'lived experience' of mental ill health. Overall, however, this was a network of people who could provide camaraderie, support and advocacy for one another.

When we worked with them, the group members had no permanent meeting place to meet having previously been evicted from their base in an unused part of an abandoned psychiatric hospital. This abandoned psychiatric hospital was the focal point of local and distal political discussion about the future utilisation of the site, although the group itself was effectively excluded from participating meaningfully in these discussions, even by those with a stated commitment to promoting the group's interests. The group members included Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Initially, we met with group members to discuss doing research together. Several options were considered, and it was a Photovoice project concentrating on 'experiences' within a psychiatric hospital that was chosen by the group. A key part of doing critical research for us is working deliberately with and for the interests of the people with whom we are doing research. For us, achieving the aims, intentions and desires of the group were just as significant as Rose producing an honours dissertation of good quality. The group's reasons for choosing Photovoice were varied, but generally, they were interested in doing research that was creative in both that it utilised an artistic method (photography) and also innovative (breaking new ground) and also because Photovoice generated a space within 'legitimate' knowledge construction processes (through university affiliation) to draw upon their experiences to potentially influence policy.

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### Doing Photovoice

Group decisions on the method and direction of the research towards particular aims were the first step towards a participatory and critical Photovoice. This immediately raises an important question: is it possible to achieve meaningful collaborative and critical research in an academic setting or will the 'participation' be tokenistic and actually (re)produce the power differentials we are committed to contesting? This was a question that we needed to revisit all through every stage of the research. The stages of research we will be discussing here are research development and planning, ethic committee approval, fieldwork and analysis of texts and (un)findings.

### **Research Development and Planning**

Meaningful participation entails all co-researchers working together on all aspects of the research. In some ways, we were successful in this; in others, we were not so successful. After deciding on the method to be used, the next step was for Rose and the group to organise a 'development meeting' where interested people could meet and consider the ways in which this research project could be realised. Nine interested people, two group members and Rose decided at the development meeting that the research would involve co-researchers going to the abandoned psychiatric hospital together, taking photographs with cameras provided by Rose, telling the story of the photographs (through a non-directive interview co-conducted by Rose) and collective analysis of the texts (images and stories) generated. It was understood that Rose would then complete and submit her dissertation, and thereafter, the group would come back together and mount an exhibition as a kind of research report that would be displayed somewhere in their local area as a wider 'conscientizing' process.

Although some co-researchers wanted to participate in the way agreed, a short while after the meeting, Rose was approached by co-researchers who no longer wanted to participate in the same way. Some wanted to engage in photo-taking and storytelling with Rose only, skipping the collective analysis of the texts altogether. Others opted to bypass Rose and took their photos by themselves, sending these and a written version of their story to Rose electronically. Meaningful participation includes respecting and encouraging the different ways people do and do not want to contribute. Here, importantly, we can also reflect on how the co-researchers resisted the implicit researcher/academic power held by Rose by setting the parameters of how they wanted to participate, and in controlling their story in the written form, they avoided the intrusive probing done by a researcher. Co-researchers' resistance to researcher power is welcomed from a critical standpoint, but for researchers working to a time schedule and deadlines imposed externally (as by a university), it can raise some challenging issues.

The reasons for co-researchers wanting to deviate from the agreed Photovoice itinerary, moreover, highlighted significant issues with the 'participatory' aspects of the development

meeting. These co-researchers explained that it was the silencing they experienced from what could be best explained as oppressive gendered-power differences during the meeting which led them to opt out. In the role as researcher, I (Rose) tried to limit the power differentials within the co-research group by not controlling the meeting or pushing my research agenda on the co-researchers. One result from this reluctance to facilitate the meeting was a failure to contest other power differentials that were evident. This point was reflected upon and was kept in mind as we progressed onto the other stages of the research project.

### Ethics

Once planning and participation were agreed upon, a university ethics committee's approval was required before the fieldwork (photo-taking and storytelling) or group analysis of texts generated could begin. When working from a critical framework of reference, we need to always be actively working to contest practices and social power which do not serve the interests of those with whom we are working. For example, when applying for ethics approval, we were confronted with the situation of having to declare that the people with whom we were working had a 'mental illness' – a label several co-researchers rejected. This declaration required the researchers to show how they were working to limit the damage potentially inflicted by the research including providing research 'participants' with the phone number of a free counselling service. The group of people with which we were co-researching had formed this group as a way of moving away from psychological/counselling services. For us to suggest they should seek these services if needed would have been disrespectful of their objectives which we were working to support. We successfully argued our case to the ethics committee and subsequently avoided having to include any reference to psychological services.

### Fieldwork

Once ethics committee approval was obtained, we could move on to the fieldwork. Days and times were organised for the co-researchers who wanted to do Photovoice with Rose. The time to do Photovoice varied: some only took a few hours; two co-researchers required a full day each. Generally, the fieldwork that occurred with Rose entailed meeting at the ground of the psychiatric hospital, having coffee and walking the grounds to take photos (for an example, see [Figure 1](#)) and then finding a quiet place, in the hospital grounds or in co-researchers' homes – wherever they were most comfortable – where the tape recorder was switched on and the 'interview' would take place. Upon reflection, it would have been great to have co-researchers as co-interviewers, but at the time, my (Rose's) particular role was never disputed by any party. Problematically, I was positioned as the authority on all things research related. Conducting interviews in a critical frame of reference does not usually involve a structured interview schedule; instead, it tends to consist of open-ended questions and probes that can be used to

facilitate discussion. The focus is on having a conversation, engaging with the interviewee and asking questions in which you are interested but still allowing them to take the conversation where they want it to go. However, we stop short of engaging with talk that we find problematic, say if the interviewee started talking in a racist manner, we challenge this. In this regard, we differ from, for example, person-centred researchers who maintain 'unconditional positive regard' whatever an interviewee says. As researchers, we are not passive observers but active participants in the construction of meaning, something of which we need to be constantly aware in the moment but also when doing analysis.

**Figure 1. The image depicts the place where one of the co-researchers received electroconvulsive therapy at the former psychiatric hospital.**



### Analysis

As we were doing critical Photovoice research, we also needed to do a critical analysis. When this is done as part of academic credential assessment (as in an honours research project), we need to ensure it will be positioned by markers as academically rigorous as only a successful piece of research will be a conduit for the authority of the university and thus be more powerfully deployable in the interests of the co-researchers. This research project was about opening up spaces in legitimate knowledge construction processes not only to allow the voices of often marginalised people to be heard (those constituted as mentally ill) but also to make space for subjugated knowledges to be constructed which can contest the dominant histories and knowledge frameworks that, through power relations, maintain political and ideological social systems that oppressively serve the interests of powerful groups at the expense of those of depowered groups. Demonstrating that the dominant framework of meaning is not the only way to think about a particular issue destabilises the dominant meaning and establishes a platform

for different thinking and social action.

A way to do this is to use the theories or the 'toolbox' of Michel Foucault. His theories relate to *critique* or the challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions so that they are no longer so in order to 'make harder those acts which are now too easy' (Foucault, 2008, p. 172). In our research, a part of this task was using different analytical procedures (see Allred & Burman, 2005; Rose, 1999) to think about how, in the stories and photographs, dominant frameworks of thinking about 'mental illness' are constructed, legitimated and maintained implicating problematic assumptions and to reflect upon how these impact what we can experience, how we act upon ourselves in the social world (subjectivity) and how others can act upon us. It was also to look at examples of resistance to these dominant frameworks of meaning as a way to begin to trouble the *normalisation* of what is widely referred to as 'mental illness'.

### (Un)findings

When research is conducted within a mainstream frame of reference, there will usually be a requirement to document the 'findings' which resulted from the analysis. After all, from a mainstream perspective, research without any 'findings' has no point. However, this modernist emphasis on 'findings' does not marry with a critical frame of reference because it reinscribes Enlightenment assumptions about the possibility and actuality of gradual incremental accumulation of apolitical value-free 'facts' about 'reality' achieved empirically through objective methods. A part of critical research is to reject such modernist assumptions.

We also take up a different position to many other anti-positivist researchers. Interpersonal phenomenologists might have tried to produce 'findings' capturing the authenticity of the participants 'really experienced', known as 'lived experience'. We find this epistemologically, ontologically and ideologically problematic because, among other things, it assumes that there is a real experience that is somehow outside the processes of power relations.

We start from the position of taking seriously the 'lived experiences' of our co-researchers while situating these experiences within the political, ideological and social processes within a certain time and place. We are interested in looking behind the stories and the photographs to locate the taken-for-granted assumptions that both make it possible and almost inevitable from within a dominant framework to have a particular sorts of 'lived experience' and to be rendered compliant. We are interested in taking the 'findings' and submitting these to critique, dismantling the foundations, indeed 'un-finding' them, and attempting to opening up new ways to understand these stories of 'lived experiences'.

Co-researcher 'Emily' took a picture of the electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) section of the psychiatric hospital where she underwent such 'treatment'. Her story was about how she was



'persuaded' by her doctor to have ECT because her 'depression was not responding to medication'. These 'lived experiences' were horrible for Emily who described her treatment as '... [you are] not a patient with an illness you're some sort of criminal', and she was consequently working hard to keep herself 'well' and 'avoid becoming depressed again' by maintaining her medication, peer support and remaining in employment.

What kinds of taken-for-granted assumptions were uncovered as having needed to be constructed in Emily's accounts for the statements to make sense and to render her compliant to regime of neoliberal medical and employment-related self-care? We positioned 'depression' as discursively produced as a physical condition, a medical issue, which requires intervention to 'cure' the body of the individual. The assault on Emily was legitimised as 'treatment' via the medical expertise of the doctor which simultaneously reproduced both the medicalised/biologised meaning of 'depression' as well as the power authority of the doctor on these matters. The understanding that 'depression' can be 'cured' meant that there is no space for questioning the authority of the doctor, and Emily was worked upon by the medical interventions accordingly.

The discourse which produces 'depression' as an illness currently dominates how it is possible to understand 'depression' or indeed to be 'depressed'; mainstream research 'findings' about 'depression' have been embedded within such discourses. However, once we position 'depression' not as a medical reality but as a discursively produced medical condition, it becomes possible to 'un-find' Emily's experiences in the wider social, political and ideological context. For example, if 'depression' is a medical condition, giving Emily a pill to fix it seems perfectly reasonable. Yet, if depression is instead positioned as an oppressive social constitution, treatment by an 'anti-depressive pill' is just another means to oppressively constitute within a medical discourse. Moreover, these medications are known to be detrimental to the consumers, evidence even Big Pharma knows, yet these drugs are being prescribed more frequently (for more on the benefits of anti-depressants to Big Pharma at the expense of those taking the medication, see Duckett, 2012). Whose interests are being served here? Through the process of critique, for us to simply reply 'Emily' or the 'depressed' becomes something 'hard to do'.

We tried to look for other ways of understanding and being in the world which could also serve as ways to challenge the dominant framework of meaning surrounding 'mental illness'. Co-researcher 'Valarie' discussed how she had refused to understand her 'lived experiences' as a biological/medical 'diagnosis' and instead drew on Indigenous knowledges to understand her experiences as 'enlightenment contaminated with denial'. In such a way, Valarie contested medical and modernist frameworks of meaning, and arguably the colonising processes that belittle and dismiss Indigenous knowledges, of what is usually framed as being a 'mental illness'

and enacted another subjugated possibility of being subjectified. This is important because it demonstrates that just because a certain mode of understanding is dominant, it does not have to be this way; there are other possibilities.

Our research thus uncovered subjugated knowledge and ways of being which destabilise the 'easiness' of normalising 'mental illness' in particular ways. It explored why the dominant forms of meaning making are dominant, whose interests they serve and how these are being maintained. Medicalised, modernist understanding of 'mental illness' were repositioned not as serving the interests of the person being subjected as 'mentally ill' but rather as maintaining political and ideological social systems that oppressively serve the interests of powerful groups at the expense of the interests of depowered groups. From our standpoint, knowledge construction is always related to power relations, so an important element of research is not just describing but exposing oppressive power relations and how they are working ideologically. These are not 'findings' in a modernist sense, but they are knowledge claims resulting from research.

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#### **Photovoice: Meaningful Participation?**

When the fieldwork was complete, the original plan was to continue with a group analysis of text. Unfortunately, this never eventuated. Some co-researchers wanted to continue with a group analysis and others did not, but the final decision to not engage in a group analysis was ultimately made by me (Rose) due to timing issues with my dissertation deadline. Here, the researcher/participant problematic was not disputed but rather (re)produced, and this also highlights the difficulty between negotiating between the potential of Photovoice or other participatory action research methods and the constraints of academia. In this way, we could also consider how participation in terms of transcribing, analysing and writing up the final research project were roles not really considered by co-researchers because this research report was being marked as a component of an honours degree.

What was discussed as another alternative was to do a kind of exhibition, but unfortunately, this did not happen either. Research is exciting and absorbing for us who are completing a degree, say, and for the co-researchers, this was an interesting project that they enjoyed being a part of, but when I (Rose) left to complete my work, although still trying to keep engaged with the co-researchers, the enthusiasm seemed to 'fizzle out'. Perhaps, if the group analysis had occurred, if there had been more creative aspects (e.g. at one time, we considered doing some Photoshop-like creative reworking of the photographs) or if the research had been more radically participatory in more areas, the energy for the project may have been easier to maintain.

Other considerations of meaningful participatory research include the benefits co-researchers

will gain from the research. In this Photovoice study, the co-researchers gained copies of their photos, a creative outlet, knowing they were contributing to a knowledge base that was challenging mainstream psychological research and hopefully the enjoyment of doing something different. This research could have provided so much more: better quality cameras for each co-researcher; facilitation of photo-taking skills, research skills, interviewing skills and analytical skills through critical consciousness; and co-curatorship of a group exhibition. The peer support group benefitted in other ways: they were able to co-author a publication and co-present at a conference, and the research report was sent off to some powerful parties in the psychiatric hospital debate. A group exhibition would have been useful for the peer support group to increase support for their cause in their local area. Overall, there were some benefits to the co-researchers and peer support group, but these were minor and less beneficial than they could have been. We could argue that Rose received the most advantageous results from the research in that she was able to complete a critically based research project (which, as we mentioned before, is not a frequent occurrence for psychology honours students) as well as achieve a first class honours psychology degree which has opened doors for her future career, and the academic interests of both Rose and David were served by increased opportunity to publish papers (including this one!).

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#### Photovoice: Critical?

In thinking about a critical framework of reference, this Photovoice project was successful in that we were able to challenge, to some degree, the power differentials inherent in the researcher/participant dynamic, challenge some aspects of the academic framework which we deemed to be serving the interests of the institution rather than the people with whom we were working and rethink the photos and stories through the analysis Rose conducted to bring to the fore subjugated ways of being and different histories which emphasised the political and ideological processes and practices which maintain the oppression that was evident in the reported experience of the co-researchers.

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#### Summary and the Potential of Photovoice

In sum, we have tried to explain the importance of *frameworks of reference* and how dominant social science research works from a *mainstream* frame of reference that is usually not explicated and to make clear exactly how we worked from a *critical* frame of reference. We have briefly outlined some issues we encountered in the everyday reality of doing a participatory and critical Photovoice research project within the constraints of completing a psychology honours degree with a group of people who have experiences of being labelled 'mentally ill'. We hope that through briefly explaining our research project, we have demonstrated the potential of

critical research, that is, research can be a tool of activism, of uncovering and challenging the interests served by particular ways of doing and legitimating social scientific knowledge-work and the interests that these ways of knowing serve. We hope we have also demonstrated that radical and innovative participatory research can be carried out even from a position of low institutional power (an undergraduate student being assessed) in a methodologically conservative discipline (psychology). Whatever has been done is possible!

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### Exercises and Discussion Questions

In a Photovoice project, it is irrelevant to consider whether co-researchers are a sample representative of a wider population. Why is this so?

How could one adapt the Photovoice method for different circumstances? Could one use audio recordings instead of photographs using a 'Photovoice' method to work with co-researchers for whom visual methods were disabling (in the sense of the social model of disability)?

How could we have increased meaningful participation in our Photovoice project?

How could Photovoice be used in an emancipatory way with powerful co-researchers? Design a Photovoice study to be done with psychiatrists as participants.

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### Further Reading

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#### Web Resources

An interesting research project, which was also an inspiration of sorts for our research project was done by M. Brinton Lykes and the Mayan women of Guatemala. You can find out more about their project here: <https://www2.bc.edu/~lykes/voices.htm>

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