

Title: Transfer Student Photovoice: Developing Sense of Community at Sacramento State  
Date submitted: June 25, 2021  
Submitted by: Dr. Erin Rose Ellison

### **Project objective(s)**

The objective of this grant-funded research was to engage up to 6 undergraduate students in the final stages of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. PAR is a methodology increasingly used across populations lacking an equitable share of resources to foster empowerment and work toward institutional, community, and/or social change (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). In PAR, research is done with community-members. This PAR project was about transfer students experiences and worked to support their community-building efforts.

PAR provides opportunities for participatory researchers (e.g., transfer students on the research team) to gain skills, develop supportive relationships, and have a say in their community. It is relevant to examine SOC and empowerment as processes within the PAR research team. Within the multi-year timeline, our PAR project conducted focus groups, analyzed focus group data and presented findings, and engaged in a Photovoice project.

Photovoice was done with 8 students that resulted in 39 photos and corresponding essays about transfer students' lived-experiences. The purpose of this funding was to support engagement in the final phase of the PAR cycle: **disseminating research results from the analysis of the 39 essays and evaluating the Photovoice process** (n=8 students).

Objectives of the scope of the PDFG-funded segment of this research are to: (1) examine processes within the research team related to SOC, (2) examine processes within the research team related to empowerment, (3) evaluate the research team effectiveness broadly, and (4) examine the relationship between SOC and empowerment. In this phase of the project, we specifically address the following research questions:

- How do participants make sense of their experiences doing Photovoice?
- How do these experiences intersect with constructs of SOC and empowerment?
- What practices within the PAR process supported students' identities and experiences as learners and community members at Sacramento State?

### **Project description**

In fall 2017, two transfer students at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) asked for help: they wanted resources and to build a sense of community (SOC). Transfer students face challenges to academic and social adjustment when they transfer from a community college to a 4-year university, and indeed transfer students could benefit from developing a sense of community in their new context (Townley, et al., 2013). By fall 2018 a participatory action research (PAR) project was underway through a capstone course. We collectively named ourselves PAR-T (PAR with transfers). Over 6 semesters of collective research work, the group has included a diverse group of student scholars, nearly all who were transfers, some who were able to stay for more than one semester, but many who left after one semester.

Participant demographics over 6 semesters:

- 22 students over 6 semesters
- 9 students were able to participate for more than one semester
- Two students were with the group for 3 semesters!
- Gender: 16 women, 5 men, 1 non-binary individual
- Race: Latinx = 8, White = 6, Black = 4, Asian American = 4

Our group also included other intersections of identities, including: queer and trans students, older “re-entry” students, Dreamers, students who were refugees or from families who sought refuge from armed conflict, students for whom English is not their first language nor spoken at home, and students who had experienced homelessness and domestic violence.

This project utilized Photovoice, a participatory method in which participants take photographs, analyze them, and collectively produce knowledge about their own experience (Wang & Burris, 1997). There were 8 participants who were a part of the Photovoice phase. To meet academic requirements, photography and dialog was paired with writing, resulting in 39 photographs and essays from 8 participants which were then used as textual data and analyzed via Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2012). Our Photovoice research asked the following research questions: What is your experience as a transfer student? What are appropriate ways to build SOC among transfer students? How might that climate be more supportive for transfer students to build SOC?

### **Project outcomes and results**

Our work from spring semester centered on evaluating the process of our research team and included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students who participated in the Photovoice aspects this multi-year PAR project. This spring, four undergraduate students on the research team conducted one interview each, resulting in 4 interviews with past participants of the PAR project. Additionally, two students focused on analyzing the textual data and reporting on the process of building community and creating knowledge among the PAR team in previous semesters, which also informs the evaluation of this PAR Photovoice project.

We plan like to conduct more interviews this summer and eventually publish at least one paper from our results. We have been working on preliminary analyses for three separate papers and presentations. As of the date of report submission, the research team comprised of 6 students and the faculty member (Ellison) has created 3 presentations that are currently being presented at the Society for Community Research and Action. They include the following:

- 1) Ellison, E.R. (June 24, 2021). What is transformation? Relationships as action: Sense of community and relational empowerment among transfer students. In J. Dancis (chair) *PAR as Pedagogy* symposium presented at the SCRA biennial, virtual conference.

- 2) Zhou, S., Guillen-Chaine, D., Nunez, A., & Corona, A.M. (June 25, 2021). In search of community, we built one: Transfer students journey with Participatory Action Research. Poster presented at the SCRA biennial, virtual conference.
- 3) Cerola, M.B., Miranda, C.M., & Ellison, E.R. (June 26, 2021). Changes take time, but we keep changing: The story of an evolving Participatory Action Research project. In Cerola & Miranda (chairs) *Pursuing Institutional Change: Student-led action research for liberation* symposium presented at the SCRA biennial, virtual conference.

The conference program is attached to the email, as well as powerpoint and poster presentations, evidencing the skills and capacities that students developed, as well as the insights gleaned through preliminary evaluation. Please note that at the time of report submission, the 3<sup>rd</sup> presentation (Cerola, Miranda & Ellison, 2021) was still under revision as students prepare their talk to keep within the time restrictions.

### **Results of the current research**

Please note that this work is still in process, but as a result of our collective work this semester and the three presentations listed above, I am happy to share some insights.

#### **Photovoice Analysis** (Cerola, Miranda & Ellison, 2021)

1. Transfer students are resilient, relationships (on and off campus) play an important role in resilience
2. Transfer students are balancing identities
3. Transfer students need an outlet to communicate desires for change

#### **PAR Photovoice Project Evaluation** (Cerola, Miranda & Ellison, 2021 ; Ellison, 2021; Zhou, Guillen-Chaine, Nunez & Corona, 2021)

1. Change takes time but multi-year cohorts are difficult to manage
2. Natural disasters and pandemics can get in the way of the action phase (but all is not lost)
3. Relationships created in PAR project helped participant-researchers to utilize a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) instead of focusing on pain or utilizing a deficit orientation in research and analysis
4. Transfer students were able to create community and their own narrative of transfer student lived-experiences.

As per instructions, a one-page poster describing the results of the project is also attached. I would like to thank the Diversity and Equity Programs Office and the Graduate Division for funding this project. It was wonderful to spend time working with some of our fantastic students to complete this work.