

Upheaval, Perseverance and Hope: Documenting Student Life and Building Community During
the COVID-19 Pandemic through Photovoice

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We are a group of undergraduate students and one professor from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) who participated, among 40 classmates, in a Photovoice Project on COVID-19. CSUS is a diverse institution, recognized as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI), and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). CSUS is committed to providing accessible, high quality education for all, serving many students from communities historically underrepresented in higher education (“Sacramento State demographics & diversity”, n.d.). Over half of the CSUS student population is considered low-income/Pell eligible. Health disparities based on race and class persist (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020), and thus are a concern at CSUS, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, COVID-19 was at the forefront of city and regional news. In February, a patient transferred to UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento and became the first case of COVID-19 in the U.S. with an unknown origin (“Sacramento State demographics & diversity”, 2020). California Governor Gavin Newsom mandated a temporary statewide shelter-in-place directive in March, so in-person lectures at schools were moved to virtual lectures (CSUS, 2020). Students and professors were required adjust plans to accommodate the changes.

When CSUS suspended in-person activities, existing projects of our research team (the COLLAB), as well as the final projects for both the Community Psychology (CP) class and the

Qualitative Methods class, needed to be replaced. Therefore, our faculty mentor offered the option of a Photovoice project to document and examine experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photovoice aligns with COLLAB goals and approaches, including to promote social justice and healing by using a *desire-based framework*: an alternative to trends in social science research of depicting marginalized communities only in terms of damages sustained by an unjust society (Tuck, 2009). A desire-based framework orients researchers to understand oppression as one of many aspects of a community's collective experience.

Students were prompted to document their experiences and desires using Photovoice, drawing upon participants' imagination to craft a vision for the future that instills hope, promotes healing, and honors our collective histories and agency. We aim to present our stories of lived experience to expose the role that power asymmetries have contributed to our struggles, yet, we also include more positive aspects of our experiences, and our desires (i.e., hopes and dreams), to represent our lives in a way that is multifaceted, true-to-life, and affirming of our collective identity. In this way, we hope to avoid the psychological damage and social stigmatization that can be inflicted by well-meaning researchers who solely focus on oppression (Tuck, 2009).

You may have noticed that we are communicating about this project as both participants and researchers, because this is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, using Photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory approach to knowledge construction in which participants photograph and reflect upon their experiences according to one or more prompts (Wang & Burris, 1997). After taking photos, participants take part in group discussions focused on identifying commonalities and differences among the respective experiences of individual group members, and how these experiences are linked to structural causes (Langhout et al., 2016). The intended outcome is for participants to develop social bonds and a common

understanding of structural issues facing a community (Wang et. al, 2000). For this project, participants undertook an additional step of reflecting on their experience by writing expository essays to accompany their photos.

Photovoice builds upon the idea that the people living an experience know what is best for themselves and their community. In this process, people can identify, represent and enhance their community through photography along with three primary goals: (a) to enable people to reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (b) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through group discussions of photographs, and (c) to reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice also serves as a window into people's lives through their own perspectives.

The faculty member leading our research team chose to offer Photovoice as a final project option largely due to its ability to promote collective empowerment and healing, because students (and faculty) were struggling in the COVID-19 context. Students were experiencing the impacts of the pandemic, ranging from unemployment to illness and loss. This assignment was offered to the CP class because it related to course concepts, such as conscientization. Conscientization, the process through which groups learn to connect their experiences to societal structures, allows individuals to make sense of their struggles without self-blame (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010, p. 29). This can create an atmosphere of mutual support. Through critical dialogue and shared knowledge production, it can also support the start of collective action to redress injustices faced by the group (Wang & Burris, 1997). Additionally, the Qualitative Methods class could no longer conduct their community-based research as planned, and thus needed a way to generate some textual data to analyze using a Social Constructivist paradigm in order to meet course goals.

Students took photos in response to the following prompts: (a) What is your experience of life during the COVID-19 pandemic? What is your life like in this context? (b) How is your experience shaped by your social location/the social groups you belong to (i.e., based on gender, race, class, migration, sexuality, religion, ability, etc...)? (c) What are your hopes and dreams for life during, and after, COVID-19? Once photos were taken, students participated in facilitated discussions, and wrote essays. In the CP class, participants incorporated understandings of their choice of 3 community psychology concepts to fulfill course requirements (i.e., students should apply CP frameworks and approaches to real world problems). In the Qualitative Research Methods class, students shared their essays with a small group of students so they could conduct qualitative data analysis using Thematic Analysis, fulfilling the course learning goals (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the following section, we briefly highlight some of the work presented by participants. There were 40 participants, resulting in a total of approximately 200 essays. We identified a few photos to share, along with excerpts from the essays, and then sought permission to share them in this article. The first of our two photos is a self-portrait by student Chrystal Wilhight, depicting her from behind, holding an electronic tablet. Chrystal writes:

It is no shock that many people have been laid off from work since the beginning of this pandemic...this is my final paper of my senior year. I have a lot of different feelings about being educated and unemployed. I feel upset and mad that I put so much hard work into my education and now there is no work for me within my field because I am not considered an essential worker. I know many people around the country are frustrated because of the same reason and yet I feel guilty for complaining when there is something way bigger than my two years at Sacramento State, [it] couldn't compare to me being educated and unemployed. I do however feel glad that our country is finally starting

value [*sic*] minimum wage workers and to help people who cannot afford an education see that there is value in their work.

Student Delayna Reeve captured the second image we present. It depicts her husband in the foreground, taking in a beautiful outdoor scene in front of him. Delayna writes:

I have been really struggling recently with a lot that has been going on in my life. With being stuck in the house I have lost a lot of my motivation to do the things that make me happy...So we set out and discovered a new hobby. Now whenever I am feeling down, my husband and I look up a random campground that we can go drive to and check out for another date. We started this a few weeks ago and it has really lifted my spirit. I don't just feel trapped in one place for a month. It makes me feel like things are normal again, even just for a little while....I am grateful for this time to give me a new perspective at life, as well as an avenue to discover what really brings joy into my life.

In the coming semester, we plan to follow-up with all former student participants for an opportunity to join our research team, and/or for permission to display their work on our COLLAB website. We may continue with the Photovoice process with CP students in the Fall, as instruction will be online again. Many students reflected on how supportive and positive the experience with their Photovoice group was in their final presentations. We plan to undergo human subjects ethics review to conduct an interview study to understand student experiences of collective and deep engagement with their life under COVID-19. Finally, we plan to complete a Thematic Analysis of all Photovoice essays (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We look forward to continuing this work, and hopefully to disseminating our research to the broader community, at conferences, and in an academic journal. For more information about our process, please feel free to contact us at ellison@csus.edu.

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