



The community participatory voice method and places of the heart: Using Photovoice to foster dialogue about enhancement landscapes

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Abstract

Photovoice is not yet a widespread technique in the field of geography. However, the literature highlights the importance of this participatory method for understanding people's experiences with urban landscapes and developing active citizenship in urban planning decisions. The aim of this research is to capture the places of the heart experienced by young adults and develop solutions to enhance urban, rural, historical-cultural and natural landscapes. This research also focuses on the adaptability of the Photovoice technique to various disciplines using participatory action research, which is typical of community psychology. The participants included 21 Italian university students (90.5% females) residing in northwestern Italy, with an average age of 23.1 ($SD \pm 2.1$). The data collected through photos and group discussion were categorized, according to similarities between the photos and the transcript of the discussion. The results highlight how the young participants identified valued places, natural places and places of relationships, which engendered positive emotions, and places of the heart that produce negative emotions, such as places of degradation, polluted blue places and places to value. In addition, the participants proposed solutions to make the places of the heart more liveable or liveable again. In conclusion, the results show how the technique helps empower social change with a more conscious use of places and strategies to enhance landscapes in different communities.

Keywords: Community Psychology, Empowerment Citizens, Enhancement Landscape, Participation, Photovoice, Qualitative Methods, Research Action

1. Attachment to places: Well-being and a sense of community

Attachment to places and one's own territory brings benefits to the individual in terms of health and participation in one's community. People with greater attachment to place report

greater involvement in their communities (Mesch and Manor, 1998) with the goal of jointly protecting that environment (Brown et al., 2002; Ramkissoon et al., 2013) with responsible behaviour (Vaske and Kobrin, 2001), a view toward urban regeneration (Lomas et al., 2021) and the preservation of residents'

well-being. According to Tartaglia (2013), attachment to place leads to better health and well-being, more satisfying social relationships and greater satisfaction with one's physical environment. In the literature, as Anton and Lawrence (2012) point out, attachment to place is a complex multidimensional construct for which there is still no agreement on exactly which dimensions are involved: dependence on place, identity of place, social bond, attachment to community and emotional attachment. Place identity and a sense of community can also bring benefits in terms of psychological well-being. Recent research by Bornioli and colleagues (2018) highlights how even nonnatural elements can promote positive affective and cognitive evaluations: even urban walks can promote psychological well-being, especially in places considered significant for people. As Foley and Kistemann (2015) state, the literature on therapeutic landscapes and the relationship between environment, health and well-being has focused more on green spaces and how they can bring well-being to individuals (Doughty, 2013; Lea, 2008). Gesler (2018) states how therapeutic landscapes represent a pivotal theme in the geography of health. The author outlines such landscapes as consisting of three environments: physical or material, social and symbolic. This view reflects the close interaction between people and the physical environment in physical and mental social situations where healing can take place. Furthermore, echoing Gesler (2018), Dushkova and Ignatieva (2020) define the therapeutic landscape as one of the most important concepts of the early 21st century. More recently, blue spaces, in which water is an environmental factor with the potential to promote human well-being, have also emerged as healthy places in which individuals identify. Among the methods used in the literature to study attachment to places, well-being and a sense of community is Photovoice, a technique created as an empowerment tool to give voice to the voiceless (Lather, 2001).

2. Photovoice: A participatory community action research tool

The Photovoice technique was developed at the end of the 1980s by Caroline Wang (Wang

and Burris, 1994). After an initial debut in some specific areas, including rural contexts, social and health issues of women, young people, the homeless, indigenous populations, and young people with disabilities, the technique has found its maximum diffusion in the past decade thanks to widely used technologies such as smartphones and other devices that have allowed researchers to offer it to differentiated groups over a widespread area, covering a sociopersonal and economic point of view (Fournier et al., 2014; Rania et al., 2019; Roopan et al., 2016; Teti et al., 2013; Wang and Hannes, 2014).

Recently, the technique has been applied in various areas of psychology, such as social psychology (Migliorini and Rania, 2017; Rania et al., 2014; Rania et al., 2015a), clinical psychology (Saita and Tramontano, 2018), community psychology (Rania et al., 2015b), and health psychology (Olumide et al., 2018), and in other disciplines of the human sciences, such as education (Ciolan and Manasia, 2017; Rania et al., 2017). In particular, the past few years have also seen experimentation with new modalities of the proposed online technique due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has strengthened its dissemination and its ability to adapt to changes in research settings (Rania et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

In geographical areas, the technique is still not widely used. Fusco et al. (2012) propose using it with children in a study on the transport-environment relationship. Lee (2022), on the other hand, emphasizes how the use of participatory methods such as Photovoice can help deepen the understanding of the quality of parks and green areas associated with physical activity. As Oviedo et al. (2022) point out, Photovoice can be combined with other techniques, such as workshops and tours, to better understand people's experiences and develop a higher level of citizen participation in urban planning decisions. Other authors (Berchoux et al., 2019; Bercht, 2021; Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2018) also propose it as an integrated method with other qualitative techniques. Cumming and Norwood (2012), unlike Photovoice and photo elicitation, propose the Community Voice method of documentary film to engage stakeholders in dialogue about changing landscapes. In this

paper, however, we will propose the Photovoice technique as the exclusive method for the context of places of the heart to foster dialogue about enhancement landscapes. However, it is not easy to find research in geographical areas that uses Photovoice as the main and exclusive method (Hochachka, 2019).

Photovoice presents itself as a participatory community action research tool and is based on three reference theories that are important to better understand the technique itself: Freire's education for critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1973), feminist theory (Smith, 1987), and documentary photography (Spence, 1995). In addition, Photovoice can be seen as a tool for researchers to develop community-based interventions in research projects. The objective of the technique is to investigate a topic related to a specific territory and the community living there to identify critical issues and define possible solutions that start from the project participants and the community itself. Sharing the work of devising solutions with local stakeholders allows decision-makers to become aware of the perspectives of the population living in that area. Photovoice is part of arts-based methods (Coemans et al., 2015) and uses photographic images whose creators are participants in the Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR seeks to promote social change that starts from the bottom, with possible solutions that promote empowerment on different levels: from the individual to the group and the community. Recently, Agner and colleagues (2023) identified how Photovoice has the potential to promote social support, which can support relational empowerment.

3. Places of the heart: Photovoice elicits feelings and emotions

Attachment to place leads a subject to identify the so-called places of the heart, those places that are good for the heart, which make us feel positive emotions, and for this reason, that we choose to return to often. They are places that have a special sentimental value, that are familiar to us, that make us feel good and give us unique emotions, usually linked to important memories. The places of the heart can be both individual and collective. As Cicognani and

Mazzoni (2009) note, in the places of the heart, we find the roots of belonging to the community. Therefore, the importance of attributing the status of place to natural spaces emerges as part of the capacity to love and defend these spaces of the heart, as Squarcina (2022) suggests.

Starting from this theoretical framework, the aim of the present research is to use Photovoice as a technique to bring to light the experience of young adults in relation to landscapes (natural, urban, rural and cultural-historical), involving them in a process of finding solutions.

In fact, the Photovoice technique can be inserted within this framework of places of the heart and of the sense of community, as it allows us to grasp through photographic images what may be the feelings and emotions linked to places, landscapes, contexts, and local communities with which a specific topic want is to be explored. As Keremane and McKay (2011, p. 415) underline, "a picture is worth a thousand words": with the mediation of the pictures taken by the participants, Photovoice allows participants to describe experiences and feelings that are otherwise difficult to express. Furthermore, images representing real or symbolic situations (Rania et al., 2015a) arouse emotions in the viewer that verbal language is sometimes unable to convey (Saita and Tramontano, 2018). The meaning of photography is not intrinsic to the object itself but is attributed by whoever talks about it; each photo has, in fact, many different "voices" and arouses different feelings and emotions depending on the person who looks at and interprets the photo (Rania et al., 2015b).

4. The steps in using Photovoice

Photovoice is proposed by researchers to achieve three main objectives: (1) to make the participants reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their community; (2) to promote critical dialogue and mutual listening on personal and community issues; and (3) to share the problems that emerged and proposed solutions to critical issues with local community actors.

To achieve these objectives, the Photovoice technique includes some steps that we can

visually summarize with the image shown in Figure 1.

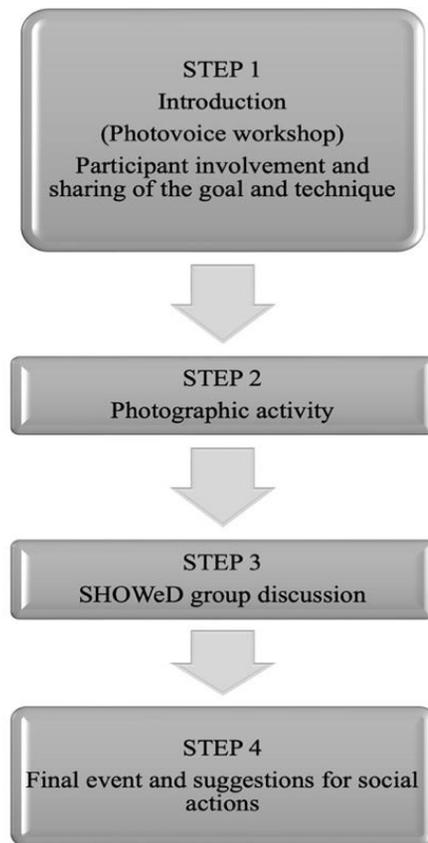


Figure 1. Photovoice steps.
Source: modified from Rania et al., 2014

As a flexible and adaptable tool, Photovoice can be adapted to the specific research context (Rolbiecki and LeMaster, 2021; Sutton-Brown, 2014). In Step 1, the researchers proposed the Photovoice technique by explaining it to the participants and by giving some indications on photographic techniques to motivate the participants to use the photo shoot to immerse themselves fully in the role of photographers. The participants then reflected on the theme proposed to them and shared it with the researchers. Over the following days, usually approximately two weeks (Step 2), the participants, with a view to participatory action research, wandered around places familiar and unfamiliar to them and individually photographed what best represented subjectively and symbolically the theme they were reflecting

on. Subsequently, each participant, after taking numerous photos, selected the ones they consider most significant to share with the group.

Each participant added a short comment, caption, or representative name to each chosen photo to be shared when presenting the photo to the group. Step 3 consisted of a group discussion that was facilitated by the researcher through a guided group interview from a sequence of questions developed by Wang (2006) that take the name “SHOWeD”, an acronym that corresponds to the five questions on which the group comparison develops. The questions that the researcher/facilitator must follow are presented in Figure 2. The participants gathered together. Each presented their photos with the personal meanings and subjective feelings related to the photo, and then they discussed the questions proposed by the facilitator, presented in Figure 2.

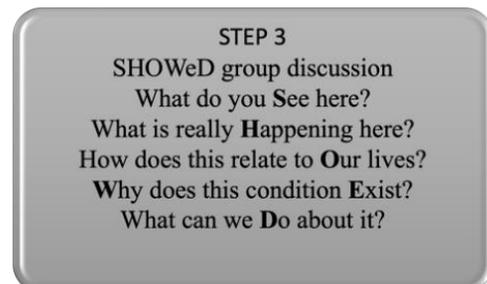


Figure 2. Questions of the SHOWeD group discussion. Source: modified from Rania et al., 2022a.

Once the solutions have been found to reduce the critical issues presented by the group, in the last part of the group discussion, the participants organize themselves to present a photographic exhibition and elaborate the path taken, sometimes in PowerPoint or in the form of a poster to be presented to local stakeholders and the community. The final event in which the results of the chosen path and the social actions are produced corresponds to the last step in Photovoice (Step 4). Based on the years of experience implementing this technique, the participants tend to either decide to bring all the photos or select some that they consider more representative and that can return the work done

in the previous phases, with a view to social empowerment.

The meeting with the local community is open to stakeholders and interested citizens and represents an opportunity to share and reflect on small group discussions of Photovoice and proposed solutions in the wider community. Such a moment becomes a proactive method of social action for change for the wider community that takes part in the event. This is why Photovoice leads to empowerment development at different levels: individual, group and community. Indeed, first, there is the individual who reflects on the theme by taking photos; then, there is the group that discusses the photos and solutions; finally, there is the local community that immerses itself in the exhibition and welcomes and evaluates the solutions proposed by the small group of participants. All are involved in a process of empowerment and social change.

5. A first experience of Photovoice to foster dialogue about enhancing landscapes

5.1 Aims

The aim of the research is to capture the places of the heart experienced by young adults and develop solutions to enhance urban, rural, historical-cultural and natural landscapes.

5.2 Participants

The participants included 21 young Italians (90.5% females) residing in regions of northwestern Italy, with an average age of 23.1 (SD \pm 2.1).

5.3 Ethical and data collection procedures

Photovoice presents a particular ethical challenge, as it involves not only the participants, as in many studies, but also people who might be photographed (Rania et al., 2022a). Some authors (Bisung et al., 2015; Grieb et al., 2013; Prins, 2010) have identified some guidelines: in the present study, during the Photovoice workshop, the researchers explained

the different ethical aspects (the informed consent that was read and signed by the participants and the privacy and ethical responsibilities to the people who could have been photographed and who also had to sign a consent form before the use of the photos). The study plan falls within the ethical recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki and is in line with the standards of the American Psychological Association (APA).

The data collection, which lasted two months, procedures followed the four steps of the Photovoice technique presented in the previous paragraph. The participants, university students in their second year of study in social work, were divided into 3 groups of 6-8 members, distributed so that in each group, there were subjects belonging to different places of residence. The participants joined on a voluntary basis, and no funds were used for this research. The first phase and the third phase were carried out on the university's premises where the data were collected. The second phase took place independently.

5.4 How to analyse the collected data

The data collected during the Photovoice were of three types: visual data (photos) and two types of textual data, consisting of the individual comments to the photos and the transcripts of the group discussion that took place during the SHOWeD group discussion. A triangulation process of these data was used for analysis.

Two independent researchers with the support of the qualitative software NVivo12 (2018) categorized the materials by identifying similarities among the objects and the contents of the photos and transcripts. This data analysis procedure is based on the approach used by Charmaz (2014), in which an open but analytical coding of the data identifies significant codes that contain recurring concepts and similarities in the data (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Therefore, from an initial "open coding" (Kuckartz, 2014) step, the authors identified themes and subthemes based on the research question and the detailed contents provided by the participants on a specific theme (Heydarian, 2016).

5.5 Results

The participants produced 66 photos. No photos contain recognizable people because participants did not feel comfortable involving potential subjects in the consensus process and because their focus was on places and landscapes and how they aroused positive or negative emotions, leading to feelings of well-being or malaise. Categorization led to the identification of two themes: places that aroused positive emotions and places that aroused negative emotions. A number of significant photos are listed for each theme. The code, e.g. G1P2 below each figure identifies the group number and the participant who took the photo: Group1Participant2.

5.5.1. Places that bring positive emotions

For the places that arouse positive emotions, generating well-being, the following subthemes emerge: places valued, natural places, and places of relationships.

Places valued

Among the places of the heart that the participants wanted to share were places with positive connotations and links to their childhood, such as gardens enhanced by games dedicated to children (Figure 3), places that were passed through during their daily lives, such as a gallery used as a library (Figure 4) that connects the urban space to the station, and the historic buildings in the city centre, which are open to citizens to show their beauty and historicity (Figure 5).

The city's urban resources, as defined by the participants, therefore represent places that can be a source of positive emotions and well-being for those who live and use those spaces.



Figure 3. Charlie Chaplin Gallery in Alassio.
Source: photo taken by G2P3.



Figure 4. Charlie Chaplin playground in Alassio: Conscious development.
Source: photo taken by G2P4.



Figure 5. Palazzo Rosso. Inserted in the list of the 42 palaces registered in the Rolli of Genoa.
Source: photo taken by G1P2.

Natural places

The participants wanted to highlight how the natural places that represent landscapes (Figures 6 and 7) are also places of the heart, which reflect specific moods and are associated with positive emotions, which recall a state of well-being.



Figure 6. The golden hour: A time to feel good about yourself and others, including elements such as a beach, sea and sunset, or an ideal cocktail.
Source: photo taken by G3P7.



Figure 7. A natural place that instils harmony.
Source: photo taken by G2P7.

With these images, the participants wanted to share the natural places that transmit well-being and positive emotions.

Places of relationships

Among the places of the heart reported by the participants are those where the focus is on the relationships that are established, which convey a sense of community and belonging. These

places arouse positive emotions and a general sense of well-being in those who live there. Some examples are represented in Figures 8, 9 and 10. In the first one, some children are intent on drawing to build something beautiful together and stay together; the second and third ones, however, are examples of communal social places, where spaces and activities, such as sport or even simple relaxation, can be shared.



Figure 8. Places to share experiences, where you feel whole and welcome.
Source: photo taken by G2P1.



Figure 9. Sports field: All together for the sake of being together.
Source: photo taken by G1P8.



Figure 10. Mutual exchanges of everyday life.
Source: photo taken by G1P5.

The reported places, with different aspects and attached motivations, all refer to positive emotions that have a strong impact on the well-being of those who live there.

5.5.2. Places that bring negative emotions

Participants also identified places that arouse negative emotions and that, for this reason, risk causing discomfort. These places have been divided into the following subthemes: places of degradation, polluted blue places and places to be valorised.

Places of degradation

Many photos focused on children's playgrounds, places of the heart associated with childhood, where all the participants underlined the dimension of degradation, neglect, and abandonment (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Playground fenced off because it is unsafe: it would take very little to restore it.
Source: photo taken by G3P3.

These aspects were also present in other negative public places as defined by the participants, such as swimming pools, public toilets, unfinished or unused buildings (Figure 12), and the so-called green spaces where uncultivated grass led to a nonuse of the spaces and to the perception of the degradation of the landscape (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Can buildings such as this be reused again to welcome people back?
Source: photo taken by G1P4.



Figure 13. No one reaches this bench to relax anymore. Source: photo taken by G1P3.

All these places aroused negative emotions such as nostalgia, anger, desolation, disappointment, discouragement, and sadness in the participants.

Polluted blue places

Particular attention was given to places of the heart, defined in the literature as blue spaces, such as the sea and the beach, which are often polluted due to human neglect (Figures 14 and 15).



Figure 14. People are often not interested in the environment, throwing rubbish on the ground as well as in the water, ruining not only the beauty of the sea but also the health of the fish. If we all paid more attention, we could live in a city with a clear sea; instead, we only have a greenish sea. Source: photo taken by G3P7.



Figure 15. The waste that we most commonly find on beaches is plastic, glass and cigarette filters. This waste, if not disposed of correctly, ends up in the sea, causing serious consequences for marine flora and fauna. Source: photo taken by G1P5.

Places to value

Finally, among the places that arouse negative emotions, the participants mainly identified monuments, such as historical symbols (Figure 16), historical buildings (Figure 17), theatres (Figure 18), and museums (Figure 19), which, according to them, are not used often, except for special occasions, and could therefore become cultural places to be valued.



Figure 16. Historical symbols of the city: This is a symbolic place in our city and a meeting place for us young people. Source: photo taken by G3P5.



Figure 17. Historical building of the city open only on special occasions...a real pity!
Source: photo taken by G3P1.



Figure 18. Cultural resource to be valorised: Our history must not be lost.
Source: photo taken by G2P7.



Figure 19. Undervalued museum inside a church.
Source: photo taken by G2P6.

The photos that the participants shared and reflected on, although reported as places of the heart, represent a source of discomfort due to the level of degradation, neglect and non-use to which they are subjected.

5.5.3. Solutions to enhance urban, historical-cultural and natural landscapes

Starting from the negative emotions aroused, the participants themselves identified possible strategies and solutions to enhance urban, historical-cultural and natural landscapes. The solutions that emerged relating to places that generate negative emotions are shown in Table 1.

The solutions identified, therefore, presuppose the participation of an active citizenry that inhabits the places in a mindful and responsible way.

<p><i>Places of degradation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a community network • Redevelopment and environmental cleaning to encourage good practices • Experimenting with shared artistic and creative experiences to increase well-being
<p><i>Polluted blue places</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing of good practices to restore polluted public spaces • Raise awareness of environmental protection to improve the sense of community • Communicate more information about the effects of pollution • Spread greater awareness of the damage caused by water pollution • Promote the cleaning of beaches and green areas
<p><i>Places to value</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of the third private social sector in the management and maintenance of public places • Redevelopment of buildings, roads and territories • Organize innovative events aimed at all age groups, to allow more frequent attendance at theatres and historical complexes

Table 1. Solutions, categorized by the Authors, identified in relation to places that generate negative emotions.

5.6 Discussion

The objective of the research is to capture the places of the heart experienced by young adults and to develop solutions for the enhancement of urban, rural, historical-cultural and natural landscapes. Furthermore, another objective is to highlight how Photovoice can be a technique that makes use of photos, allows participants to express and share their state of mind in relation to local places, landscapes, contexts and communities, generating reflections and solutions with a view to individual, group and community empowerment.

From the analysis of the photos and comments, it emerges that the places of the heart shared and described by the participants and the relationship established between people and places have the power to influence the level of perceived well-being, as already highlighted in the literature (Rollero and De Piccoli, 2010). In particular, places perceived as natural and cultural, linked to one's childhood, and where it is possible to share spaces and activities are associated with positive emotions, capable of generating well-being. This is in line with recent research by Knez et al. (2018), who demonstrated how natural landscapes are able to generate greater well-being in participants. Equally fundamental are the ties, identity and sense of community linked to a specific place, whether natural or built, as they bring benefits from psychological well-being (Bornioli et al., 2018). Alongside the places that generate well-being, the participants also highlighted those places that had been degraded or polluted or that needed to be valued again and that caused them to feel unwell. The sight of bare, abandoned, polluted places causes a sense of anger, discouragement and desolation to grow in the participants, with important repercussions on health and perceived well-being, as also highlighted by Townshend (2021). He finds in the lack of green spaces dedicated to children and in pollution two factors linked to the environment that can influence, in different ways, the health and well-being of the individual. Similarly, Fleming et al. (2019) highlight how many studies have documented marine pollution as one of the extremely dangerous factors impacting human health. However, the marine environment, if cared for,

could be an invaluable resource for community well-being.

In the field of geography, Photovoice is rarely used as the main technique or exclusive method of inquiry and change (Hochachka, 2019). Therefore, the present study highlights how Photovoice is a tool that stimulated participants to reflect, share and search for solutions (Ciolan and Manasia, 2017; Rania et al., 2020) to consciously and responsibly enhance those places of the heart considered abandoned and rundown, which generated discomfort in them. The solutions aim at activating individual and collective pro-environmental behaviours, fitting into what Jorgensen and Stedman (2006) have defined in the field of environmental psychology as the sense of place, a multidimensional construct that represents the beliefs, emotions and behavioural commitments related to a particular geographic environment. In our case, the sense of place was represented by the places of the heart in the various facets and connotations that took shape during the discussion phase and were reported in the results. In particular, for places that arouse discomfort, such as those that are rundown, polluted and neglected, the participants tried to identify positive environmental behaviours at an individual or community level to make them more liveable, highlighting the importance of active and responsible citizenship in different life contexts, with a view to individual and community empowerment (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2015). Menatti and Casado da Rocha (2016), in relation to the landscape cocreation process, highlight how humans, from a cultural and ecological point of view, play an active role. The authors highlight the importance of the right to the landscape, which must be shared with present and future generations, as heritage that must be preserved, not so much for aesthetic pleasure as for the influence it exerts on the health and well-being of individuals.

6. Final remarks

In this short paper, we have tried to present the Photovoice technique as a methodological tool for participatory action research with the aim of enhancing dialogue on landscapes. The participants, led to reflect on their places of the

heart and on the way these places featured in their life contexts, were able to grasp, with the support of photographic technique and critical reflection, the problems with their territories. Furthermore, with a view to enhance group empowerment, they were able to identify solutions and proposals to improve and enhance the territories and landscapes of the different communities in which they live. Therefore, Photovoice positions itself once again as a research technique generating participatory action capable of producing social change by blending with different disciplines in recent years from those in which it was born and developed. Its versatility allows for a specific use to promote the need for citizen participation in the enhancement of the contexts and landscapes in which they live.

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