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Using Photovoice to Understand the Experiences of Life as a Mother in Thetford, Norfolk, England—A Community-Based Participatory Action Research Method Embodying Matricentric Feminism

Using photovoice to demonstrate a matricentric approach with mothers involved in community research illustrates a powerful example of a methodology that aligns with matricentric feminism and exhibits its value. The purpose of this community-based participatory research was to gain insight into the experiences of mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Thetford, Norfolk, England, where there are pockets of high deprivation. The researcher provided disposable cameras to a group of mothers and asked them to photograph their experiences as well as the issues affecting them as mothers. Once the photographs were developed, the mothers discussed the photographs through unstructured interviews. The results produced sixty-four photographs, and the discussions yielded further stories. There were four main themes discovered upon analysis: crime and safety; housing; appropriate areas for children and environment; and surroundings. The author recommended further research in this locality to acknowledge the strengths and assets mothers demonstrate while mothering and to encourage using a matricentric feminist lens within scholarly work for further policy development and community empowerment.

Matricentric Feminism—A Mode of Feminism for Mothers

Matricentric feminism is a relatively new mother-centred feminism that explores mothers and mothering through a matrifocal lens (O'Reilly *Matricentric Feminism*). It attaches significant value to the subject of mothers, mothering, and motherhood through scholarly inquiry, and it seeks to increase

research from the perspective of mothers while deemphasizing the child centredness that has previously been assigned to this scholarship.

To foster a deeper understanding of the differing ways of mothering, research is needed that connects readers to narratives and experiences that they have not had themselves in order to deconstruct certain assumptions and misinterpretations. To challenge the potential misrepresentation of mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and illustrate the realities of their lives, which are sometimes ignored in favour of more privileged experiences, it is essential to offer alternative perspectives. There is a common assumption that compliance with local and national policy initiatives will improve outcomes for marginalized mothers, but this is inaccurate. Focusing on statistics only will not allow us to know mothers, as they can sometimes reinforce the negative stereotypes assigned by professionals and politicians. Neither do the statistics help us to understand the layers of complexities that shape the lives of mothers; they only offer epidemiological data offering a superficial understanding of the actual experience of mothering. O'Reilly (*Twenty-First Century Motherhood*) highlights the omission of mothers' actual lived experience despite feminist theorists researching the effect policy has on areas of their life.

This research project not only offers insight to the experiences of mothers living in Thetford, Norfolk, England, using photographs and discussion in the hope of facilitating change but also provides an example of matricentric feminism research. A review of the literature has revealed that this is the first research project of its kind working with mothers in Thetford. The project used the empowering methodology of photovoice in which participants take photographs and use the images created to inform social action. Photovoice is a process by which people can create visual images and accompanying stories that may promote knowledge and dialogue about personal and community issues through the discussion of their photographs. This methodology has been used in a range of contexts to assist communities in uncovering barriers and to help them use local resources to strengthen their health and wellbeing. The method was developed by Caroline Wang, a professor and researcher with the University of Michigan and has been used among many different populations including rural Chinese women, the homeless, and urban populations (Wang and Burris; Wang et al.).

Photovoice

Photovoice encompasses three theoretical frameworks: empowerment education, feminist theory, and documentary photography. Social researchers recognize photovoice as a vital tool for community-based participatory research (CBPR) because of its accuracy in gathering information (Graziano).

Feminist theory respects and encourages women to use their understanding and experiences to become advocates, and documentary photography is the tool that provides the vulnerable or powerless people the ability to their story (Cataloni and Minkler). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that photovoice only allows us to view a community at a certain place in time. Participants use photo images to capture aspects of their environments or experiences and share them with others. The pictures can be used with captions composed by the photographers to illustrate the realities of their lives.

Background

The aim of the research was to gain insight into the experiences of mothers living in the town of Thetford using photovoice, with the research could be a starting point to build community relationships allowing reflection of what it is like to be a mother there. Overall, the situation looks encouraging when the levels of deprivation in Thetford are assessed. However, the town suffers from hot spots of deprivation, which are mainly concentrated on two specific estates: Barnham Cross and Abbey (Child Health Profile for East and West Thetford). The Abbey estate, where this research was undertaken, has suffered from a poor reputation, as negative connotations have been associated with its former name: Abbey Farm. The estate is still identified as the most deprived in Thetford. The west side of Thetford where the Abbey estate is located, fares significantly worse than the rest of England in crucial areas, including breastfeeding, income deprivation, violence, domestic abuse, teenage conception, and child poverty (Health and Well Being Profile).

However, due to the diverse population of Thetford, many of its problems resemble challenges often faced by more urban locations. The rural setting of the town limits the expertise and solutions required to address many of the issues. The most recent commissioning plan for Norfolk and Waverney Clinical Commissioning Group 2016/2017–2018/2019 has detailed the future direction of supporting children and young people; it identifies that the child health profile will be used to identify key priority areas over the next two years (Norfolk and Waverney Clinical Commissioning Group). However, without engaging in conversations with the people affected by these issues, it will remain challenging to develop and implement locally appropriate interventions.

For this study, recruiting participants involved a combination of distributing flyers and snowball sampling. The flyers explained the project with the main heading, “Exploring what it is like to be a mother in Thetford. Your community, your views!” The recruitment criteria included mothers over the age of eighteen who lived in the town of the Thetford.

The introductory discussion with the participants focused on points they wished to explore, including consent forms, photo release forms, ethics, and

potential risks and how to minimize them. A second meeting was also arranged. At the second meeting, consent forms were collected, ethics and time frames were discussed and time for any further concerns to be discussed was offered. A time was arranged to collect cameras. Disposable cameras and log books were distributed to the participants. A brief instruction was given, but there was no formal photographic training given. Each camera and log book was labelled with a letter to protect identity. The collection of the cameras was arranged a week later.

The films were developed and returned to the participants within several days. Each participant went through their own photographs with the researcher and an unstructured interview followed of their thoughts, feelings, and photographs.

Data

The data for this project yielded sixty-four developed photographs overall; notes from the memo books participants were provided with as well as recordings and notes from unstructured discussions around the photographs were also collected. There were no specific themes set for participants prior to the photographs being taken, and they were given the freedom to photograph what was personally relevant to them. A suggestion to photograph both positive and negative aspects of being a mother in Thetford was the only loose proposal. Following the development of the photographs each participant discussed their photos individually alongside any notes they had taken during the project.

Reoccurring themes appeared across the photographs and notes. These were housing, environment and surroundings, crime and safety, lack of appropriate areas to go with children and the community centre. When split into the naturally occurring themes there were 11 photographs focusing on crime and safety, 10 photographs focusing on housing, 15 photographs focusing on appropriate areas to go with children, 27 photographs focusing on the environment and surroundings and one photograph of the local community centre. These areas were all problematic to the mothers living on the estate and impacted their lives and mothering. The enthusiasm for taking the photographs was obvious from the outset. The mothers felt they had a lot to capture that reflected their day to day experiences.

There were no personal photographs taken, and the mothers were very clear on what they wanted to photograph. They expressed a desire to photograph other members of their communities who they thought were behaving inappropriately, but they completely adhered to the rules of not photographing another without consent. The participants were really excited to get their photographs back and to look through them. They were surprised how well they had turned out.

Here are a few comments the participants made about issues of concern to them.

Housing

Concerning the housing situation, one participant said the following:

The housing here is so old. A lot of it needs knocking down and rebuilding. They won't do it though. The houses are not good. There aren't enough. Maybe that's why we have people living in tents behind my house and along the river. They had even put up a washing line. My kitchen is falling apart.

Another commented about the poor housing in the area: "My friend lives in those flats with her baby and there are mums with babies in those. They are damp and on my friends the security lock doesn't work so anyone can get it. We are just left. No one cares."

Environment and Surroundings

About the surroundings, one participant said the following: "What is the point? We feel undervalued. Maybe devalued. People give up. There is no consistency with anything here. They set things up then six months later take them away."

Another had this to say:

The shops on this estate are awful. I wish we could have a green grocer. It's so far to go to the big supermarkets. We could go and grab a cabbage or some veg if we needed to. It would encourage people to eat healthier. A green grocer would be welcomed. There are so many green spaces on this estate. We could use some to have allotments. We could even have chickens and get eggs and grow flowers. I wish we could have veg and flowers. The young people here would love to do that. We could have a community that grew things and sustained itself.

One participant talked about the stigma associated with living in Thetford: "People judge you straight away when you say you're from Thetford. They judge you when they know you live on the Abbey. What sort of future does that give our children?"

Another participant spoke about the contrasts present in Thetford:

It's such a contrast here. Look at the beauty of Thetford. I have these people camping behind my house. I could make a holiday brochure advertising the lovely woods. "Come to Thetford and camp." It's because there are housing issues and alcohol issues and drug issues. The beauty of all these areas is spoilt. We can't take the children and go and sit and have a picnic somewhere. It's not like that now.

Community Centre

One participant spoke about

The Abbey Community Centre should be the centre of the Abbey community. It's the only community centre left in Thetford. It was the hub of the community. We ran a cafe from there, and people came. The young and old. We had the tear away the lads sitting down with old ladies having lunch. We used to have specials. We never paid ourselves a penny, but we did manage to give one girl from the estate a paid job working in there. We had to pay ... rent but ... our landlords refused to service the extractor fan in the kitchen. We couldn't afford it, so we had to close the cafe. Everyone came there for everything. They had computers there people could use. Now they charge outrageous hire charges. I thought it was about localism ... but there is no support here to do anything.

Unstructured Interviews

The unstructured interviews deviated slightly from the traditional group discussions of many photovoice projects due to difficulties in arranging a time and place when all participants could attend. As a result, the unstructured interviews took place individually, and at this stage, there has been no group discussion. However, this did create an opportunity to have deep and meaningful discussion of most of the photographs each participant had taken, as they were free to express and explore their own thoughts openly without fear of what another participant might say or think.

The photovoice project was modified to meet the needs of the participants. The recruitment process over such a short time period was challenging, and a higher number of participants might have yielded more data. However, the data gathered were rich, and there was plenty of time to spend with each participant, which allowed them to say what they wanted.

The participants were not given guidance or training on using the cameras as is sometimes the case. This is an aspect of photovoice projects that should not be dismissed, but the lack of direct instruction could be considered a strength in this project, since it ensured the project developed organically. Using an unstructured style of interview allowed participants to direct the conversation and discuss the issues they felt were most important to them.

The impact of the project on the participants and the researcher is not easy to measure, but it is most heartwarming to witness the vision of community change these mothers want to try and bring to their lives after this initial small pilot project. These women thought and talked about issues affecting the community, not just personal ones. As a result of the project, the participants

have begun enquiring how they might make an action plan to use a disused community shop as a green grocer and apply for funding to initiate allotments to grow produce for it.

Local government and policymakers are tasked with addressing problems in communities. However, there is often a lack of understanding of the obstacles and issues faced by local citizens resulting in actions that often have no impact on the very people the policy was meant to help. For the development and design of more locally appropriate interventions, a platform to empower local people to reach out may allow them to initiate change. To gather local information, this type of community-based participatory research can be implemented to provide an accurate account of the community.

The researcher discovered participants of this project are willing to take control of their communities and lives to make improvements to their wellbeing. These mothers must be viewed with awe, as they demonstrated such a willingness to participate in this research; not only did they list the issues they faced, but they also offered their own ideas for potential solutions. Through their discussion, the participants long to break away from the stereotypes they are labelled with in their communities and to raise their aspirations. With further support, they could have an impact on changing this poor reputation Thetford has, which seeps into many aspects of the lives of people living there. The Report to Norfolk Health and Wellbeing Board (2014), which covers the Joint Health and Well Being Strategy 2014-2017, highlights “creating a healthier physical environment” and “promoting behaviour change” as priorities. This involves increasing access to healthy food choices, making the most of a potential planning system to create a healthier environment, and creating opportunities to engage with communities. These responsibilities fall on the local council. If it tried to engage with local mothers and families, these plans could be implemented. As it stands, local leaders work from the top down, and they impose their ideal of what they believe is going to put things right in these communities without giving the members a voice. Nowhere in their reports do the local leaders address any of the issues that emerged from this photovoice project.

This project provided an opportunity for marginalized or disadvantaged members of a community to share their experiences of what it is like to be a mother living on a deprived housing estate through photographs. Participants were able to bring their own voices to this project and represent themselves. This is especially important because communities and their members can be isolated from policymakers and local government and they do not always have the confidence to vocalize their experience.

What is unique about this type of research is that it illustrates an alternative perspective of mothers facing deprivation and offering insight into their lives. Reproducing or repeating research that portrays mothers using the same

narrative each time is simply a reproduction of knowledge. By choosing to find ways that help mothers tell their stories and experiences, researchers can shape and shift the more dominant narratives that are heard and make positive progress. The academic and activist Verónica Gago insists that mothers need to come together collectively to find solutions and not place such emphasis on mothers independently solving their problems. In order to do accomplish this, it must be acceptable for all mothering stories to be shared.

It is difficult being a mother and navigating all that comes with it, and by firmly placing all of the responsibility the individual mothers alone, the problems associated with being a mother cannot be addressed. The context and structures mothers are mothering in must be acknowledged, which again reiterates the fundamentals of matricentric feminism.

Mothers from poorer backgrounds can be targeted, blamed, and shamed for societal failings without question. Continually insinuating that the problems of society can be assigned to bad mothers perpetuates a dangerous narrative. There are unrealistic expectations placed upon mothers; society expects mothers to fulfil and carry out numerous roles, many of which contradict one another. Deborah Levy refers to this as neopatriarchy and writes about the contradictions that the government repeatedly disavows. She describes neopatriarchy as requiring mothers to be *“ambitious, maternal but erotically energetic, self-sacrificing but fulfilled—we were to be Strong Modern Women while being subjected to all kinds of humiliations, both economic and domestic”* (Levy 23). This is unrealistic, and society should stop pretending mothers are or should be perfect.

There are many conflicting parts to being a mother, yet society applauds the stories of the so-called good mother while casting judgement on the mothers who are deemed bad. Idealized stories and images are unhelpful and ultimately cause more harm to mothers. Sarah LaChance Adams has written extensively on the complexities of maternal life and is adamant that mothering should be understood more broadly.

This is why I strongly advocate an interdisciplinary approach to studying mothering. We ought to be making use of all available perspectives and avoid relying on popular assumptions about motherhood or on the experiences of a few if this investigation is to be adequate from a feminist point of view. None are harmed more by the maternal ideal than mothers and children (23).

She is keen to point out that mothers also have failings just the same as everyone else and that mothers and children will suffer if their realities are ignored. LaChance believes “that if we care for the well-being of children we *must* care for the well-being of their caregivers.”

A recent publication by Jacqueline Rose (2018) encourages more researchers

to consider alternative aspects which may reassure mothers it is okay to be honest about mothering. To keep ignoring the untold aspects of mothering will ensure nothing will change. Neither is it helpful to place lesser value on the experiences of mothers from less fortunate backgrounds. The challenges all mothers face are acceptable to talk about. The strengths all mothers hold are okay to talk about, even if those strengths are found in mothers from outside of the most commonly heard voices. It is essential to invite alternative stories of mothers who are heard less often in order to provide different perspectives. Mothers are already usually bound by the dominant culture they are expected to adhere their mothering to; therefore, repeatedly giving opportunity for only one aspect of their story to be revealed is detrimental to their mothering. This applies not only to mothers but to their daughters and their daughters' future.

The constructed narrative of the bad or dangerous mother continues to influence institutional areas that include law, governance, economy, and child protection. In order to confront the misplaced assumptions and judgments that come from continually portraying aspects of some mothers from a negative moral standpoint, scholars must reject the labels attached to descriptions of mothering. Miri Rozmarin confirms the importance of giving voice to the words of different mothers to gain deeper understanding of their positions. Something many scholars are reluctant to do.

There is a very real possibility that some of the voices of mothers we neglect to hear could be from the most courageous mothers. The most commonly accessed portrayals often shared to influence policy and governance can cause considerable concern. Exposing these experiences is perfectly justifiable, as no one can deny the existence of situations where women are mothering under duress, but scholars must be cautious of blurring the lines in how these experiences are represented, especially when portraying women who are from poorer backgrounds as victims.

Conclusion

This research has laid the foundations for further photovoice projects and has given community members the belief they can implement change. The participants want to take community action, and it is hoped this project alongside further research will help inform decision makers and local leaders about the areas of concern highlighted. Strong foundations have been built that may foster further community-based participatory research and help demonstrate the needs of the community to various influential bodies.

Community engagement from local councillors and policymakers would help foster relationships with community members. Further exploration could be done in this community by investing more time in the community over a

longer period, which could help build trust and could help recruit a larger number of participants from a specific area in the town.

If scholars adopt a matricentric framework based around authenticity, authority, autonomy, and advocacy, there could be a shift not only in the way mothers who are mothering outside of the so called normal discourse are perceived but also in the way they view themselves. This framework would allow mothers to challenge and alter the norms they are bound by.

In conclusion, photovoice is a positive example of utilizing a research methodology that enables mothers as participants to provide positive insight and understanding about mothering in difficult circumstances. If research methods that involve and include the lesser known voices of mothers in communities can be implemented in future research, this will not only strengthen understanding but will show the value of adopting a matricentric feminist lens to enable the voices of mothers to become stronger.

The previous scholarly work undertaken has deepened my passion to undertake research that seeks to further expand the breadth of mother's narratives that must be heard and retold again and again in order to enhance the evidence needed to ensure there is support for mothers in the planning of their communities. In essence, in order to create a strong matriarchal social system, we must undertake more research that is matrifocal in its focus, which would allow us to oppose the assault on mothering that some mothers face.

Additional Note

It is important to highlight that this is a small pilot project that was designed to build relationships with mothers living on this estate in the hope of creating future projects together to gain a deeper understanding about mothering in areas of high deprivation. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how using a matricentric-friendly method can facilitate the foundations on which more in-depth research can be done. As a result of this pilot project, the author is currently conducting matrifocal narrative case studies using photo elicitation in order to understand her own experience of mothering in extraordinary circumstances and the experiences of other mothers and their mothering. Ethical approval was sought and given from the Ethics Board of the School of Health Sport and Bioscience, University of East London. There were no financial incentives or gains offered or given to the participants.

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