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Journal article

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This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Miller, E., Buys, L. and Donoghue, G. (2019). Photovoice in aged care : What do residents value? *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 38(3), pp. e93-e97, which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajag.12641>.

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Miller, E., Buys, L., & Donoghue G. (2019). Photovoice in aged care: What do residents value? *Australasian Journal of Ageing, Early view*, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajag.12641>

## **Photovoice in Aged Care: What do residents value?**

**Objectives:** This paper visually explores older aged care resident's day-to-day lived experience, as well as providing a brief introduction to the participatory documentary photography method of photovoice.

**Methods:** Ten residents from one Australian residential aged care facility collaborated with researchers and care staff to photograph, reflect on and share their lives. Photographs were shortlisted in individual and group discussions.

**Results:** Residents' photographs and narratives provide a visual understanding of what they value. Photographs captured three core themes: the restorative joy of nature (frangipanis); active engagement through leisure activities (football); and the value of social interactions and connections, especially with fellow residents and staff (friendship).

**Conclusion.** As old age and aged care remains virtually invisible within popular visual culture, this research highlights the communicative value of participatory photography for challenging stereotypes, as well as the opportunities, challenges and value of visual methods with this cohort.

**Keywords:** aged care, ageing, participatory photography, photovoice, qualitative

### **Impact Statement**

This paper uses the novel participatory documentary photography method of photovoice to explore and visually share older resident's day-to-day lived experience of aged care. It demonstrates that participatory photography is a valuable way for aged care researchers to engage staff, residents, their families, and the broader community in a dialogue about ageing, older age and the experience of everyday life in aged care.

A decade ago, Prince and Butler (1) reported older Americans were more afraid of 'ending up in a nursing home' than their own death. Despite a significant paradigm shift towards consumer-directed, person-centered, and individualized models of care (2), many people still view aged care negatively (3). But does the experience of life inside aged care reflect this dominant negative cultural narrative? Using the novel participatory visual method of photovoice (the joining of photography with voice, pioneered by Wang and Burris; 4), this project visually explores the everyday experience of aged care to shed light on what is valued by those at the centre of the question – residents.

### *1.2. Visual representations of age in gerontological research*

Visual images are part of daily life, in television and magazines, to personal photographs shared on social media (5). Yet, old age is virtually invisible in this public visual narrative, which "systematically devalues and erases age" (6 p.101) positioning the look of age' as 'unwelcome and undesirable' (7 p.40). Despite the increasing use of visual research methods with community-dwelling older people (e.g., 8,9,10), the camera has rarely been used as a research tool in aged care.

Two notable projects have asked residents to photograph what facilitates 'a sense of home'. Photographs from twelve Netherlands residents captured the natural environment, mobility and activities (11), while research with ten African-American residents' emphasised atmosphere, cherished possessions and social interactions (12,13). As visual methods remain rare in aged care, we outline a recent Australian project.

### **Method**

Participants resided in one outer suburban 107 bed residential aged care facility, 40 kilometers from the Brisbane CBD. The university human research ethics committee [QUT12000372] approved the study, with written informed consent obtained. Informational posters in the facility, as well as a verbal invitation from management, invited interested residents to an introductory workshop. This outlined the project, photographic ethics and how to use image consent forms when people were visible in their photographs. Inclusion criteria were aged 65 and older and no formal diagnosed with dementia. Residents engaged in two interviews (7 months apart), a care staff-facilitated photovoice task, and a group photovoice workshop.

Given residents' chronic ill health, poor mobility and unfamiliarity with digital photography (only one had previously used a digital camera), care staff facilitated the photography task (an approach also utilised by 11). Residents used a communal facility-owned camera located in the lounge, recording image details in a nearby

research notebook. Approximately every two months, staff assisted residents to narrate three recent “highlights and lowlights”, as well as taking or selecting up to three photographs that best represented their daily lives. Staff directly entered answers into an online database, using an iPad. This paper draws on photovoice data from ten participants<sup>1</sup>: two males and eight females, ranging in age from 66 to 92 (average age 80 years) whose deteriorating health (Parkinson’s, arthritis, cancers, stroke) had motivated the move to aged care. Most (n=8) had lived here less than a year.

Table 1 illustrates the final photo selection workshop. All 40 images were printed in large A4 size, pinned around the room and discussed. Residents placed a red sticky dot on their favourite 15. Most were able to walk up (using their walkers) and stick their dots directly to the images; for those with poorer mobility, a flip-folder containing copies of all images was provided. Shortlisted images were moved to one wall for final discussion, theming and labelling. Residents confirmed their preferred pseudonym and collaboratively curated 19 photographs, for an exhibition they chose to name: “*My Life - Frangipanis, Friendship and Football: A Photovoice Exhibition of Life in Aged Care*”. The narrative and visual data (words and photographs) were analysed thematically, combined where appropriate (14). This thematic analysis focuses on the 19 images residents selected, as this is how they wished to portray their life in aged care to others.

*Table 1: The process of selecting photographs for the exhibition*

		
<p><i>A resident holds her favourite image, covered in red dots as many residents voted for it.</i></p>	<p><i>Residents, researchers, family and one staff member hold their favourite images.</i></p>	<p><i>Residents display their favourite images, capturing valued friendships and family history.</i></p>

**Results**

Residents’ photovoice tell a collective story of their life in aged care, highlighting the value and importance of social connections and of engaging with life through relationships, activities, outings and enjoying nature. Challenge, illness and sadness were not featured. Table 2 illustrates how the 19 photographs residents selected emphasized three interconnected themes: friendships (with residents and staff), leisure activities and excursions (craft, swimming and football) and simply appreciating the

<sup>1</sup> 15 participants completed the first interview, but health constraints meant only 10 engaged with the photovoice task. Only 8 completed the second interview (one died and one declined due to declining health).

beauty in the local natural environment (frangipanis). Boundaries between categories are fluid; for example, while Rose’s football photograph is broadly classified as leisure (activity), it occurs outdoors (nature) and with others (friendship). Photographs have been publicly exhibited on site, at a celebratory facility event, and industry conference.

Table 2: My Life - Frangipanis, Friendship and Football

Frangipanis (3 photos in Exhibition)	Football (13 photos in Exhibition)	Friendship (3 photos in Exhibition)
 <p data-bbox="193 846 539 936"><i>"The native frangipani looks magnificent. It is pure, perfect"</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="571 846 903 936"><i>"We love football! We watched the game and the team made the finals"</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="962 846 1262 936"><i>"Friendship. We have found great mates"</i></p>
 <p data-bbox="204 1238 528 1328"><i>"The Golden Panda tree brightens my day to day life. Nature is beautiful"</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="587 1238 890 1328"><i>"We love crafts"</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="946 1238 1281 1328"><i>"I love fruit"</i></p>
 <p data-bbox="193 1585 539 1646"><i>"To watch the ducklings hatch, oh it is nature"</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="571 1585 903 1646"><i>"I love swimming!"</i></p>	 <p data-bbox="946 1585 1281 1646"><i>"Ah we have fun! We have close friendships with staff"</i></p>

Only three images comprised the nature/frangipanis theme, with residents describing the peace they felt in nature. Providing access to local wildlife by maintaining attractive outdoor spaces, resulted in both incidental exercise and place attachment, Residents described enjoying walks to *"the bird aviary... and, in the other direction, goldfish pool"*. Thirteen photographs captured the central role of group activities in residents’ daily lives. This second theme is succinctly labeled *"football"*. Residents’ photographed organized leisure activities (n=6), events (n=4) and excursions (n=3), including exercise classes, bingo, craft, concerts, men’s club, and outings to football. Activities provided a

reason to “*get up in the morning and get dressed*”, facilitating fun social interactions. One image narration describes “*making the Christmas wreaths was such fun. What a festive mood!*”. The final theme was friendship, with three photographs (staff, co-residents, friendship). The co-resident photograph was simply narrated “*Friendship. We have found great mates*”, while the fruit photograph illustrated friendship with catering staff. Before aged care, many residents recalled going days without talking to anyone; they were delighted to now be leading more socially active lives inside aged care, and forming close relationships with peers and staff.

## **Discussion**

This brief report offers a unique contribution to the literature on visual methods in gerontological research, with older aged care residents photographing their lives. Residents took 40 images, shortlisted favorites and collectively curated 19 images for an exhibition sharing three core themes: appreciating the tranquility and beauty in the local natural environment (frangipanis), engaging with life through leisure activities (football), and valuing personal relationships (friendship). This visual representation, alongside narratives, provides rare participant-generated insight that challenges stereotypical representations of an ‘unhappy’ life in aged care.

Consistent with past qualitative and visual research (15, 11, 12), residents’ images revealed the importance of positive social interactions (and friendships) as essential. The caring and enthusiastic engagement of staff was critical, with Elsie’s photovoice a ‘selfie’ with a staff member she viewed as family. Consistent with the two other aged care photovoice studies (11, 12) these Australian residents also enjoyed, valued and photographed features in their local natural environment – gardens, local wildlife and, of course, frangipanis. With research demonstrating the positive restorative impact of nature (16), these findings have implications for building design. Residents valued an interior environment with views and connections to the outdoors, with these accessible exterior environments facilitating physical activity as residents *wanted* to go walking outside.

While residents chose the photographs to take and display, and made the final decision about the ‘story’ told, we must note the missing or absent images. Wang and Burris noted ‘all methodologies disclose as well as hide’, there were very few private or ‘negative’ images. The high level of staff-involvement and collaborative co-production approach may have influenced residents’ choice of ‘appropriate’ subject matter, restricting their openness, creativity, and willingness to be negative and critical. However, the two other photo voice studies in aged care reported similar image choices (11, 12), and these residents desired staff assistance (most described stiff, arthritic fingers and being unskilled in photography). Photographs are always socially constructed, representing an intended message created for an intended audience. Photovoice images reflect “*identity construction and how they want themselves and their lives to be seen by the researcher and represented in the images*” (17, p.685). Other

research has shown people of all ages simply prefer thinking about and photographing positive images (10, 18). Indeed, our own subsequent researcher-facilitated photovoice project documented similar findings with older aged care residents: there is an interesting, potentially generational, reluctance to photograph negative experiences (19). These residents preferred reflecting on and sharing moments of fun in aged care, with the task unexpectedly highlighting how close residents were with staff, described as *'family'*. For facility management, residents' photographs served as a powerful visual reminder to facilitate relationships with staff, activities, and connections to nature.

This photovoice project was a rare opportunity for older people to reflect on, discuss, and visually communicate their lived experience of aged care – a narrative of positivity. We hope it inspires other aged care facilities and researchers to use the camera as a tool to engage staff, residents, their families, and the broader community in a dialogue about the ageing, old age and the aged care experience.

### **Acknowledgments**

We acknowledge and thank all the participants who so graciously contributed to this research, as well as our industry partner, aged care provider Ballycara who supported aspects of this work.

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