

Bridging the Gap: Using Photovoice to Understand Feelings of Community Among Persons with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness

Raegan Hoffman, David Wartman, Carolyn Glogoski
San Jose State University, San Jose, Ca, United States

- This was participatory action research (PAR) using qualitative methods through Photovoice (Wang, 1999, 2005) to obtain the unique perspectives of persons with SMI.
 - Determine how persons with serious mental illness (SMI), who were previously homeless and now in supported housing, perceived community?
- 2) To identify what belonging and being connected to the community meant for persons with SMI?
- 3) To describe what barriers and resources influence a sense of belonging and community participation.
- 4) To explore the viability of Photovoice as a unique method of obtaining the perspectives of participants' with SMI as to how to improve the quality of their lives.
- Four residents participated in six 75 minute groups. Interventions included: digital camera instruction and digital storage; discussions of boundaries; practice with digital cameras; check-in group discussions on belonging and quality of life; one-on-one semi-structured, qualitative interviews about selected photos using identified questions; final group discussion of photos, the group process and how to experience better quality of life.
 - Digital images were selected and discussed by each participant. The themes voiced (photographically) by participants included: a very limited physical range (geographical distance) of the "where" of community; community and belonging experienced as the immediacy of the supported housing program and the locus of quality of life; and how important it is to work together to create beauty in their own community context as a part of that belonging.
 - This study contributes to a better understanding of community belonging and what influences daily occupations and contributes to quality of life for this group of persons with SMI. Results suggested, Photovoice, is a viable method to better understand the subjective definitions of community for this group of persons with SMI.

The implications of this study to the practice of occupational therapy support the principle of client-centered treatment. Photovoice is one way to ensure that the subjective aspects of one's experience in the community are assessed prior to interventions relating to social participation. Results aid in the accumulation of evidence-based knowledge used to ensure best-practice methods.