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Our World Through Our Eyes: Adolescents use photovoice to speak their mind on adolescent health, well-being and sexuality in Lima, Peru

Angela M. Bayer, PhD,

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA and Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima, Peru

Mónica Alburquerque, and

Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Lima, Peru

Our World Through Our Eyes Participants

Angela M. Bayer: ABayer@mednet.ucla.edu

Abstract

Peru's approach to its 5.7 million 10-19 year olds has shifted toward positive youth development. Following that trend, our objective was to facilitate Peruvian adolescents' use of photovoice to better understand the factors affecting their health, well-being and sexuality and to work with adolescents to present policy and programmatic recommendations. Photovoice sessions were carried out with 13 12-16 year olds from low-income Lima. Sessions included basic photography and ethics, photo-taking, and descriptions and discussions using the SHOWeD method. Participants grouped their photos into a "photo story." Each section of the story consisted of a message and 4-10 photos. Each photo had a caption that answered the SHOWeD questions. Messages were: 1) "health and well-being in danger of extinction"; 2) "with some signs of hope"; 3) "innocence in spite of everything"; 4) "what we as adolescents have"; and 5) "but we lack opportunities to live a better life and a responsible sexuality." Participants presented the photo story to program planners, policymakers and community members. Results underscore the value of including adolescents in program and policy planning and affirm that photovoice can achieve such inclusion. Photovoice provides a concrete method for adolescents to speak their mind through image and word.

Keywords

Adolescents; Photovoice; Health; Well-being; Sexuality; Peru

Introduction

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the literature described adolescence as challenging and stressful and adolescents as problematic and distressing. Hall initiated the categorization of adolescence as a time when adolescents move between extremes in a tempestuous process (Hall, 1904; Muuss, 1996). Subsequent approaches to adolescents used a “problem-focused” paradigm (Leffert et al., 1998; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2002; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998) and viewed young people as “at-risk” (Carrera, 1996) and even “broken” (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Prior to the 1990s, youth who behaved “well” were viewed as youth who did *not* engage in *risk* behaviors (Lerner, 2005), not as youth who engaged in *positive* behaviors (Pittman et al., 2002).

In the 1990s, positive youth development emerged. As Lerner (2005) described, youth need to be aligned with developmental assets at home, school and elsewhere and linked to competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution to self and one’s broader context. Pittman et al. (2002) proposed three interconnected programmatic goals for achieving youth development: reduce youth’s problems, increase youth’s skills in several areas, and foster youth engagement in organizations and communities.

Peru’s approach to its 5.7 million 10-19 year olds (INEI, 2008) has shifted toward positive youth development. As stated in a recent report, Peru has focused on “banishing” adult-centric perspectives that may have been present in earlier legislation, policies and plans (UNFPA & SENAJU, 2010, p. 33). For example, the Youth Policy Guidelines (2005) promote the incorporation of youth as actors in their own development. The Adolescent Health Policy Guidelines (2005) specify universal access to comprehensive, differentiated care for adolescents, with special emphasis on key health issues including sexual and reproductive health.

This project is rooted in positive youth development and youth as strategic actors in their own development and health through the use of community-based participatory research (CBPR). Health-related CBPR represents “a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings... [It] has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change to improve health outcomes and eliminate health disparities” (Kellogg Health Scholars Program, no date). Photovoice exemplifies CBPR since it involves participants in the entire research process. Specifically, photovoice provides cameras to people “who seldom have access to those who make decisions over their lives” (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996, p. 1391) to document their lives from their point of view, promote dialogue about issues that are important to them, and reach policymakers and broader society (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1996). Photovoice began with women in rural China (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997, 1994) and later projects have addressed public health issues with different populations, including with youth (Brazg, Bekemeier, Spigner, & Huebner, 2011; Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Findholt, Michael, & David, 2011; Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, & Kipke, 2012; Necheles et al., 2007).

Few photovoice projects have explored health issues with youth in low- and middle-income countries (Short, 2006; Vaughan, 2010). Therefore, this project's goal was to facilitate adolescents' use of photovoice to better understand what adolescents view as the factors affecting their health, well-being and sexuality and to work with adolescents to present policy and programmatic recommendations.

Methods

Setting

In Peru, 70 percent of 15-29 year olds live in urban areas (UNFPA & SENAJU, 2010) and 32 percent reside in Lima (INEI, 2008). This project was conducted in Pampas de San Juan de Miraflores, located in the district of San Juan de Miraflores, which is one of Lima's 43 districts. "Pampas" consists of 46 human settlements that are home to 57,000 people. Most residents are poor or extremely poor and live in overcrowded households and a significant number lack water, electricity and sewage (Muni SJM, 2003).

Participants

Thirteen 12-16 year olds participated from March to July 2006. Participants were selected from an earlier study in which twenty 12-17 year olds participated in life history interviews about their overall lives. For that study, interviewees were recruited through non-governmental organizations located in different zones of "Pampas" (Bayer, Gilman, Tsui, & Hindin, 2010a). Many interviewees expressed significant interests in the arts and the inability to explore these interests due to limited economic resources. The first author therefore developed this photovoice project to enable participants to share their lives through art.

The Asociación Benéfica PRISMA Ethics Committee in Lima approved this project. Participants provided signed assent and their parents/guardians provided signed permission. All adults photographed gave written permission and parents provided written permission for children to be photographed.

Photovoice Sessions

Initial sessions were prepared based on the curriculum suggested by Strack, Magill and McDonagh (2004), modeled on work by Wang and Burris (1997). During implementation, sessions were modified in two cases: 1) from the outset, based on previous work with adolescents in Peru and 2) during project implementation, in response to participant feedback. For example, in case #1, since the first author's past work with Peruvian adolescents showed that they tend to prefer concentrated, varied activities, with several activities per session, we condensed the initial Strack et al sessions into fewer sessions. In case #2, we reduced the number of photo discussion sessions since participants were excited about but overwhelmed by the SHOWeD method. They stated that they are not used to expressing – and even more so writing about – their own ideas.

Twelve sessions were implemented over 3.5 months. Most sessions lasted 1.5-2 hours, although sessions 8-10 lasted 4-5 hours each.

Sessions 1-2—Session 1 covered the following: an introduction to photovoice, including a description of the goals of photovoice, the structure of photovoice sessions and applications of photovoice in other contexts and populations; time for participants to look at photos from diverse magazines and newspapers, to expose participants to photos they may not have seen before and to spark their creativity and curiosity; an introduction to photography techniques and ethics; and a short group photo-taking expedition, to allow participants to start their transition to being photographers immediately. Session 2 centered around a group outing to a photography exhibit of a local newspaper's collection of the best photos in recent years. The session included discussion about the exhibit's photos, discussion about their photos from the group photo-taking expedition during Session 1, and brief brainstorming about factors that impact adolescent health and sexuality. The latter discussion was kept to a minimum to not unduly influence participants' photographing choices. Participants received their first disposable cameras here.

Session 3—Following time for participants to take photos and collection and developing of the photos from the first cameras, participants discovered and discussed their first photos here. Given the predominance of photos that showed trash and favorite television shows, the first author facilitated a discussion about youth as researchers and “active participants” who think creatively about documenting factors affecting their health and sexuality. The entire group also brainstormed other issues they might be able to photograph, again keeping the discussion brief to allow the photographers to think independently and creatively. Participants received their second disposable cameras here.

Sessions 4-7—These sessions involved further photographing by participants, on their own with disposable cameras and as a group with limited digital cameras. During session 4, participants discussed the photos from their second cameras and learned about the SHOWeD methodology, developed by Wang (1999). SHOWeD includes five questions: 1) What do you See here? 2) What is really Happening here? 3) How does this relate to Our lives? 4) Why does this situation, concern or strength exist? and 5) What can we Do about it? (Wang, 1999). Participants also wrote about a few of their photos using the SHOWeD method. During session 5, participants went on a group photo-taking expedition. During sessions 6 and 7, participants employed the SHOWeD method to write about additional photos. They then presented their photos and accompanying SHOWeD descriptions to their peers, who provided feedback. Participants modified their SHOWeD descriptions based on peer feedback.

Sessions 8-10 (extended sessions)—Sessions 8 and 9 included the selection of the final photos and the development of the messages for their “photo story,” finalization of the SHOWeD description for each photo, and development of the content and design for their photo exhibit and presentation. During session 10, participants prepared the exhibit itself, stapling all materials onto display boards following their content and design plan. (See Data Analysis section for greater detail.)

Session 11—Participants created individual photo albums to keep as a project remembrance. Throughout the project, participants expressed an interest in having their own copies of the photos; therefore, this session was created.

Session 12—The final session was a presentation at the Municipality of San Juan de Miraflores, during which participants presented their “photo story” of key messages and photos. The exhibit of the photo story was then open to the public for one month. (See Results section for more detail.)

Data Analysis

All analysis took place with participants given the objective of participants identifying what affects their health, well-being and sexuality and describing how to address these factors. Initial analysis took place during sessions 4-7. This analysis focused on each photo as a separate unit and involved participants thinking about the response to each SHOWeD question for that particular photo. First, participants wrote descriptions of their individual photos using SHOWeD. Next, participants discussed their individual photos with the larger group and requested feedback. Then, participants finalized their individual photo descriptions. Additional analysis took place during sessions 8-9, when participants moved from analyzing each photo as a separate unit to analyzing all of the photos taken by the group. First, participants reviewed all of the photos taken during the project and selected the photos they wanted to include in their “photo story.” Then, they worked together to sort the photos by message/theme and labeled each group of photos with a tentative message. Participants continued to sort the photos in different ways until they agreed on 1) the final messages for their “photo story” and 2) the photos to represent each message. During session 9, participants also finalized their individual photo descriptions and developed the layout and content for the exhibit and presentation. These final steps also represent analysis since participants were deciding on exactly how their photos would be presented.

Results

Seven females and six males aged 12-16 (average age 13.8) participated. Most participants (10/13) were born in Lima and three were born outside of the capital. Twelve participants were currently studying and one had dropped out of secondary school. Two participants worked in addition to going to school.

Participants collectively took hundreds of photos. Although trash and television dominated the initial photographs, after a brief discussion, the youth photographers quickly understood that this was an opportunity for them to document any and all things they felt were important for their health, well-being and sexuality. In turn, they expanded their themes and became more creative and adventurous with their photographing, taking their role as researchers and active participants seriously.

Initial analysis was at the level of individual photos, carried out independently by each photographer using the SHOWeD method, with feedback from peers. When introduced to SHOWeD, participants were intimidated about having to write about the content, meanings and implications of their photos. However, following examples, excitement grew since

participants saw that the SHOWeD questions would guide them through the thought process behind each photo. A powerful example of what can result from SHOWeD comes from the photo in Figure 1, taken by Ronald. Titled “Telephone post with an ad” (*SHOWeD question 1*), the full description reads: “This is an advertisement about menstrual delay in front of a hospital – but they [these ads] exist everywhere (*question 2*). Many women resort to this because they don’t want to have the child (*question 3*). This is a worry because some women who turn to this die (*question 4*). We can change this by closing all of these clandestine places (*question 5*).” At first glance, this photo could be an advertisement for almost any service when in reality, it publicizes abortion.

Further analysis was across all of the photos, to create a five-section “photo story.” Each section consisted of a main message that addressed what participants wanted the audience to take away from that section of the story and 4-10 photos, each accompanied by a caption that answered the SHOWeD questions. The main photo story messages were: 1) “health and well-being in danger of extinction”; 2) “with some signs of hope”; 3) “innocence in spite of everything”; 4) “what we as adolescents have,” with six sub-sections; and 5) “but we lack opportunities to live a better life and a responsible sexuality.” The first two messages mark a contrast. Message 1, “health and well-being in danger of extinction,” includes photos of what predominates in the community: trash everywhere, in front of houses and schools and on and next to roads; sand everywhere, since there are limited paved roads, no sidewalks, and parks with no grass, only sand; graffiti everywhere, including on the walls of the school and health post; dried-out trees; precarious, poorly constructed houses with building materials strewn on rooftops; and a recent land invasion with houses made out of plastic tarp and straw mats positioned on unstable terrain. This is in contrast to message 2, “with some signs of hope,” which shows the positive dimensions of the community, which are present, but in limited quantities. This includes healthy green trees and brightly-colored flowers, beautiful sunsets, churches, community-operated popular eating places (*comedores populares*) and daycare establishments. The third message, “innocence in spite of everything,” documented children who were present everywhere and who participants felt were able to maintain their innocence, always smiling, playing, being mischievous and “just being kids,” despite their surroundings.

The final two messages centered on youth. Message 4, “what we as adolescents have,” was divided into six sub-sections. The first sub-sections were: 1. “friends,” including little friends (children they knew personally), friends (peers of a similar age), and big (older) friends; 2. “family,” including people who “are always present”; 3. “pets who never let them down”; and 4. “education,” featuring photos of photographers’ schools and teachers. Sub-section 5, “recreation,” included: soccer fields; Internet businesses, where participants mentioned that adolescents and young people go often to chat with friends and search for information for school, since they are relatively low cost; and movie theaters, which participants described as cost-prohibitive for adolescents in this setting (Figure 2). The final sub-section, “fun that’s sometimes dangerous,” showed: gambling machines in neighborhood stores, which children and adolescents also use; betting and alcohol consumption in their families and neighborhood, which participants stated that they observe regularly; and nightclubs that participants and other adolescents sometimes frequent since

dancing is a safe way to have fun (there are days and times when nightclubs are open only for minors). However, there are sometimes problems with alcohol, drugs and presence of older adolescents and adults.

Participants felt that Message 5, “but we lack opportunities to live a better life and a responsible sexuality,” resulted from the previous messages, especially message 4. As shown in message 4, adolescents have support from friends, family and pets and access to certain education and recreation opportunities. However, participants felt that they did not have sufficient structured opportunities to develop as individuals, particularly with regard to their sexuality. An example of a photo caption from message 5 is: “As adolescents, a lot of us start to have partners. This is a strength since it’s nice. It’s also a worry since unwanted things can happen. That’s why we need workshops about how to live our sexuality in a healthy – and fun – way. These activities need to address how to use and where to get condoms and other contraceptive methods.” Photos grouped under this message show couples, family planning methods and condoms, sex hotels, and pornography in newspapers (Figure 3).

Participants presented the photo story to municipal program planners and policymakers that work with/influence youth, family members, friends and other community members at the local municipality. As a result, participants were invited by attendees to participate in the upcoming “youth participatory budgeting” process, during which youth work with municipal staff to determine priorities for youth programming. Additionally, the photo exhibit was open to the public at the municipality for one month.

Discussion

Results presented here confirm the eloquence with which adolescents can express their perspectives about their own lives when given the opportunity to initiate this expression with photos and develop and culminate their thought process through discussion and written word. Adolescents were further motivated to share their perspectives given their excitement about the prospect of sharing their photos with others, including policymakers. Results also demonstrate that the photovoice methodology works well with challenging topics such as health and well-being and sensitive topics such as sexuality.

This project strongly affirms the value of the theoretical bases for photovoice; empowerment education, feminist theory and documentary photography. Empowerment education, based on Freire’s problem-posing education, recommends visual image as a means of enabling people to think critically about their lives. Photovoice moves from problem-posing to empowerment since the photos are taken by people themselves, instead of by others. The empowerment in photovoice is strengthened by its rooting in feminist theory, which underscores exploration of realities by and with – instead of on – people (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1996). Initially, participants here were intimidated about photographing their lives and disbelieving that someone would ask them to document their lives. Early photos reflected these perceptions since participants restricted the images to items within and immediately surrounding their houses. Once the first author clarified with participants that they were free to photograph whatever they chose, the photos’ content and style

expanded dramatically, affirming the creative and insightful images that emerge when people – including adolescents – have the power and tools to share their realities. The third foundation for photovoice, documentary photography, uses image to record social issues, traditionally through images taken by professionals based on the argument that professional images are of superior quality (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1996). Photovoice contends that individuals are experts in their own lives. This means that they are also the ideal people to choose which issues to document and how to document them (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1996). The first author emphasized to participants the importance of focusing on their photos' content, not the technical dimensions. Participants found this liberating since they could concentrate on what to photograph, not how to photograph it. Despite this, participants had to choose how to take the photo in order to focus on what they were photographing, even if they did so unconsciously.

This project also reaffirms use of image to stimulate documentation and reflection; the SHOWeD method and group discussion to stimulate further reflection and clarify and reinforce ideas; and presentation to program planners, policymakers and others to culminate the goal of giving voice through photos. Starting with photos taken by participants proved incredibly important, particularly given the lack of opportunities for Peruvian youth to express their ideas due to the education system's rote learning focus. On the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, Peru ranked in the bottom three of 65 countries on the integrating/interpreting and reflecting/evaluating components of the reading section (OECD, 2010). Participants' photos, however, were an excellent catalyst for interpretation, reflection and evaluation. The SHOWeD/group discussion sessions helped participants move beyond the more traditional "What do you See here?" to think through the causes behind the situations documented and propose ways to strengthen or modify these situations. Finally, participants took the preparation of the exhibit and presentation quite seriously, inspired by the challenge and excitement of sharing their work with others, particularly decision makers. They spent hours sorting through photos, discussing and deciding on messages, and preparing the exhibit.

Our results provide insight into unique adolescent perspectives that others would not traditionally have access to or would not seek to access. Photography, like other art forms, is a matter of interpretation for the artist and observer. Although this mutual interpretation is what makes artistic expression art, this can lead to the observer reaching an understanding that was not the one intended by the artist. In photovoice, the photographer's perspective is crucial. As Wang and Burris (1994) described in their initial paper on "photo novella," facilitators' feedback to one woman's photo almost caused the participant to obscure the exact thing she was trying to portray. We had similar experiences. For example, Marcos photographed a pregnant friend and upon seeing the photo, all participants encouraged him to write about adolescent pregnancy. He responded strongly that her pregnancy was not why he took the photo. He photographed his friend laughing since she is always happy and inspires others to stay positive.

Final reflections relate to the photo story, particularly the influence of community and the need for structured health-related opportunities for adolescents. Messages 1-3 focused on participants' broader community while messages 4 and 5 are more directly linked to

adolescents. The latter messages, however, also incorporated community influences (teachers and schools, soccer fields, neighborhood stores) and external influences such as the media. This demonstrates how participants envision certain factors (the broader community, teachers, the media) that have traditionally been considered as distant from adolescents (Blum & Mmari, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993) as being proximal to and influential for adolescents, as seen previously in this population (Bayer, Cabrera, Gilman, Hindin, & Tsui, 2010b). Participants documented and described how factors impact negatively and positively on their own health, well-being and sexuality and that of other adolescents in their community. The resounding conclusion participants drew is that, on balance, adolescents need more than what is currently available. They recognize and highly value what they have, which is significant support from many individuals and education that is good but very rote. However, they stated that these are not sufficient for strong adolescent development. Participants requested structured educational and fun activities that are provided in a dynamic, creative manner outside of school hours. They also want and need access to sex education that talks openly about topics including contraceptive methods.

Participants closed the presentation and exhibit with a photo of an elderly couple. Participants chose this photo since it shows love, something they would not like to change since love is powerful. This positive closure echoes the findings of earlier interviews with these and other adolescents in this setting (Bayer et al., 2010a). Although adolescents face challenges in their daily lives, they appreciate the positive things around them and maintain positive expectations for their future health, well-being and sexuality.

Conclusions

Results were used to develop a small non-governmental organization, Planting Magic Beans (PMB), which continues to work with youth from the community to facilitate their achievement of future life opportunities. The project album is available at: <http://www.plantingmagicbeans.org/our-history>.

This project underscores the value of including adolescents - particularly adolescents from low-income communities in low- and middle-income countries who do not often have a vehicle to share their perspectives and experiences – in program and policy planning and affirms the strength of photovoice to achieve such inclusion. We hope this experience can serve as a model for adolescents and those who work with adolescents in diverse settings worldwide.

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Figure 1. Telephone post with an ad (Ronald, age 16)
Caption within text.

Figure 2. El cole (Erika, age 12) and Game on top of it all (Mónica, age 16)

This is my school. It's a strength because it helps us to better ourselves physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. It's also a worry since there are bad schools with bad teachers. I don't want to change my school, but there are schools I'd like to change, by talking with mayors, school directors and teachers.

Young people are playing soccer. People should play more sports since they are good for us, they make us healthier, and we make more friends and become more sociable. There are a lot of deteriorated soccer fields because of a lack of organization and support. The municipality should accept more projects to improve our recreation spaces.

Figure 3. Two dolls (Karen, age 13) and “Zero-star” sex hotel (Marcos, age 16)

These are two dolls that are being intimate in bed, using a condom. This is a strength since they're using a condom and therefore won't transmit diseases. I don't want to change this at all because without condoms, there'd be many people with diseases and HIV and many unwanted children. Everyone, including young people, needs workshops about how to use and where to get condoms.

People, including adolescents, use this place to spend a night with their partners. This is a worry since today people aren't responsible when they have sex and most don't use a condom or another contraceptive method. We can change this by giving talks to young people about sexuality, sex and contraceptive methods.