

Revisiting the roots and aims of photovoice

By: [Robert W. Strack](#), Muhsin Michael Orsini, and [D. Rose Ewald](#)

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Abstract:

Since its introduction, photovoice has been implemented in numerous fields with a wide array of outcomes of interest, but has the method been implemented in a way that is consistent with its initial aims in mind? From Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris's initial 1994 project, photovoice has demonstrated power to harness visual imagery and stories within a participatory empowerment process and established a new tool for the profession for understanding community members' lived experience and needs, raising the critical consciousness of communities, and advocating for actions leading to social change. Based in Freirean philosophy, feminist theory, and documentary photography, photovoice engages community members to identify, represent, and change their community by means of photography, dialogue, and action. Public health can benefit when researchers and practitioners more carefully conceptualize the intended aims of each photovoice effort. The purpose of this article is to consider the varied applications of photovoice and propose a classification system that encapsulates its wide-ranging aims. Close examination of foundational literature and previous applications of photovoice suggest the following categories for framing the application of the method; specifically, photovoice for (a) photovention, (b) community assessment, (c) community capacity building, and (d) advocacy for change. Full implementations of photovoice have the capacity to illuminate complex real-world issues leading to advocacy for policy, systems, and environmental change. It is our hope that the proposed framing clarifies the language used to discuss photovoice and its outcomes, distinguishes its various uses and stated aims, and maximizes its impact in future applications.

Keywords: advocacy | social determinants of health | social policy | environmental and systems change | community intervention | health promotion | health education | community-based participatory research | health research | qualitative research | community assessment | program planning and evaluation

Article:

Since its introduction, photovoice has been implemented in numerous fields with a wide array of outcomes of interest, but has the method been implemented in a way that is consistent with its initial aims? Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, in their groundbreaking 1994 article, described the pioneering application of a form of participatory photography with rural women in

the Yunnan Province of China, adopting the term *photo novella*. Their method, soon to be referred to as *photovoice*, was credited as the first application within the field of public health. The goal of photovoice was to “use people’s photographic documentation of their everyday lives as an educational tool to record and to reflect their needs, promote dialogue, encourage action, and inform policy” (pp. 171–172) and was thus “designed to include new voices in policy discussions by facilitating collective learning, expression, and action” (p. 172). Their photovoice project successfully endeavored to “cultivate people’s ability to take individual and collective action for social change” (p. 177).

The participatory nature and action orientation of the photovoice method can be viewed as a manifestation of the foundational thinking and literature of people like Max Horkheimer (1937, 2002), whose “critical theory” focused on critiquing and changing society, and Kurt Lewin (1951), who directed our attention to the importance and need for participatory action processes where individuals and communities endeavor to gather and act on information that can address circumstances and benefit society (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The participatory intent and power within the photovoice method to harness visual imagery and democratize community voice is in many ways predicated on this foundational literature. Photovoice, as an emerging participatory method, established a new tool for the profession with the potential to elicit community members’ needs, raise critical consciousness of individuals and whole communities, and motivate actions needed for social change. As Wang and Burris (1994) described, photovoice is the “daughter of many mothers” as it is based in empowerment/Freirean philosophy, feminist theory, and documentary photography, which when combined, engages community members to identify, represent, and change their community through photography, dialogue, and action.

Theoretical Foundations of Photovoice

A fundamental tenet of the photovoice process is its potential for empowerment and moving participants through the Freirean stages of raising critical consciousness. Carlson et al. (2006) summarized the cognitive-emotional movement of *individuals* through four stages of critical consciousness, from *passive adaptation* to current community circumstances, through an *emotional engagement* with issues and a *cognitive awakening* to root causes, leading to the final stage of *intentions to act*. Critical consciousness “involves people in the process that shifts their roles from learners to emerging leaders and social actors in their communities” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 185). This transformation also occurs for a community-at-large, key decision-makers, or a group of influencers that may collectively move from a state of *passive adaptation* through *emotional engagement* and *community introspection* to a state of collective *action*. Using images as Freirean “codes” or tools to facilitate discussion, photovoice participants are invited to capture and share observations and insights from their lived experiences (decodification) and collectively arrive at a deeper understanding of a community issue (Freire, 1973).

Feminist theory and thinking are embraced within photovoice and the belief that individuals should be the authorities of their own lives and advocate for productive solutions based on improved understanding of situations (Lykes & Scheib, 2015; Wang & Burris, 1994). Within photovoice, community residents are seen as experts, with shared grounded experiences worthy

of representation through data collection and group reflection. The empowerment roots derived from Freirean and feminist thinking are the foundation of photovoice's use of deductive (observed) rather than inductive (hypothesis-driven/theoretical) construction of knowledge.

The third and most pragmatic underpinning of photovoice lies within its use of photographic images to document lived realities (Wang & Burris, 1994). The impact of documentary photography on society can be traced from simple documentation of daily life to a critical reflection of realities enhanced or sometimes juxtaposed with social commentary; indeed, history is replete with examples of documentary images being pivotal in pricking the social conscience, shifting social awareness, and, frequently, social actions (Ewald, 1985; Riis, 1890/2012; Sontag, 1977; Stryker & Wood, 1973). Just as selected photos within journalistic messaging are intended to draw attention to ostensibly objective realities, photovoice elicits the same innate human attraction to the "seen" realities of others (Gubrium & Harper, 2013).

Following Wang and Burris's (1994) article, researchers recognized that photovoice's theoretical grounds could be positioned within various research approaches or methodologies, including phenomenology (the discovery of contextualized truths from the perspective of participants), grounded theory (using the views of participants to explore linkages of factors to explain phenomena), and critical theory (the empowerment of participants to understand and act on issues explored) (Evans-Agnew et al., 2017; Horkheimer, 2002). Establishing a particular photovoice effort within a guiding methodological strategy can influence what is emphasized, such as uncovering lived realities of individuals and communities, exploring underlying root causes of social concerns, and/or enlisting allies for collective actions (Liebenberg, 2018).

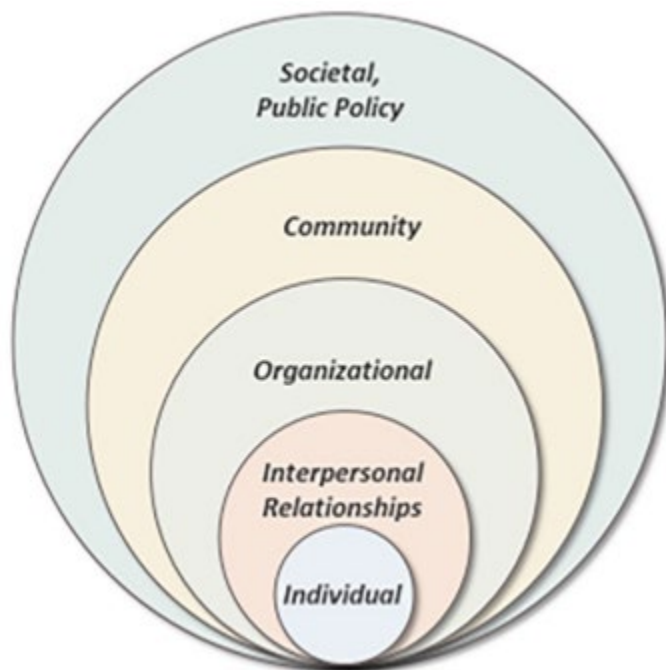


Figure 1. Social Ecological Model

Separate from these and other methodological distinctions is the desired level of change within a social ecology from the individual level through larger social and structural shifts. The social

ecological model (SEM; see Figure 1) communicates that an individual's health is influenced by their attitudes and behaviors, by community social structures, and by the reciprocal interplay among influences at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal levels of the social ecology. A priori consideration of photovoice aims relative to these influences on individual and collective health is essential to the method (Strack et al., 2010) and, where possible, efforts should be taken to target causal factors at multiple levels of the social ecology (McLeroy et al., 1998; Stokols et al., 1996).

While Strack et al. (2010) encouraged the use of the SEM framework to inform the planning and measurement of an individual photovoice project, here the intent is to establish a heuristic for categorizing the varied potential aims for the use of the photovoice method and to encourage those embarking on a photovoice endeavor to consider the outcomes they aspire to achieve. The methodological approach chosen, and the level of the social ecology targeted, should inform and guide our research and practice. While the photovoice method can influence individuals, its real power resides in the capacity to enable people to see root causes that might be addressed to improve the "health of a community" and subsequently the health of its members. Just as an X-ray depicts interior structures of a human body to diagnose a biological problem, photovoice can be a community-level diagnostic tool that looks beneath the surface to make visible social and structural challenges within a community. Photovoice participants can diagnose and advocate for policy, systems, and environmental change (PSE) at the community level, shifting its intervention focus to the "community-as-patient" in need of healing actions (McGavran, 1956). Photovoice's capacity to raise critical consciousness across all levels of the social ecology is the basis for Wang and Burris's (1994) aim for photovoice to be "an educational tool to record and reflect needs, promote dialogue, encourage action, and inform policy" (p. 172).

Framing the Aims of Photovoice

As the photovoice method continued to grow in application and utility since 1994, the stated purpose and terminology used to describe it has varied (e.g., photovoice/PhotoVoice, photo novella, auto-driven photo-elicitation, participatory photography). Literature reviews of the method reveal growing popularity among education, public health, community development, nursing, and social work researchers with an array of applications, aims, and outcomes (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Lal et al., 2012; Seitz & Strack, 2016; Wang, 2006). As a research tool, photovoice is an effective method of data collection. Where photovoice is used to alter knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors of individuals and whole communities, it is ostensibly an intervention. As a driver of systemic change, photovoice has provided a platform for enabling community voice and participation in co-solutions, social justice, and seeking upstream solutions that address foundational causes for our health. In their review, Catalani and Minkler (2010) highlight the wide-ranging applications of the method since Wang and Burris's initial study and also note tailoring across settings with considerable variation in reported purposes, participation, and documentation of results.

This article draws on the authors' experience with photovoice, careful examination of Wang and Burris's (1994) original contribution, and previous reviews (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Lal et al., 2012; Seitz & Strack, 2016; Wang, 2006) to propose a classification system that encapsulates the diverse purposes and desired outcomes of photovoice.

As illustrated in Table 1, we propose the following categories for framing the application of the method; specifically, photovoice for (a) photovention, (b) community assessment, (c) community capacity building, and (d) advocacy for change. While the first three applications of photovoice may not, as described by Wang and Burris, “encourage action and inform policy” nor be directly tied to “collective action for social change,” they are applications of the photovoice process to animate power within a community and set the stage for actions that may facilitate advocacy for sustainable change. Our intent for revisiting the roots and aims of photovoice is to not only celebrate the adaptability and flexibility of the method for gathering data and engaging individuals and whole communities, but also as a referendum for encouraging the use of the method for its full potential as a tool to advocate for change. We hope that the proposed framing clarifies the language used to discuss photovoice and its outcomes, distinguishes its various uses and stated aims, and maximizes its impact in future applications.

Table 1. Proposed Photovoice Classifications

Aims and Outcomes	Photovoice as individual-level intervention (photovention)	Photovoice as community assessment	Photovoice as community capacity building	Photovoice as advocacy for change
Example aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase of self-esteem, cultural identity, efficacy for change • Enhancement of individual knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-identification of problems and strengths • Baseline evaluation, needs assessment, and asset mapping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase local voice, collective efficacy, internal community network, and advocacy capacity • Expand external networks and connections to power and influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach policy and decision-makers • Agenda setting • Sustainable changes within an organization or system • Policy, systems, environmental (PSE) change
Example outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant self-efficacy as a change agent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritized list of key issues and their root causes identified as most essential for change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergence of new leaders on key issues and the growth of new partners enlisted to promote change efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain access to and add agenda items to decision-making body; persuasive messaging that results in some form of (large or small) sustainable change

Photovoice as a Photovention

When the primary goal of a photovoice effort is to promote change within the participants themselves and not to address community concerns or broader social conditions, it is serving as an individual-level intervention and might best be categorized as *photovention* (Strack et al., 2010). Wang and Burris (1994) allude to the individual capacity building of the photovoice process; however, individual growth and empowerment, in accord with Freirean principles, are described as the means to other ends. Because practitioners and researchers have an ethical duty to not exploit a community for the sake of data collection (Evans-Agnew et al., 2022; Lorenz & Bush, 2022), it is important to plan for the use of the data collected for community improvement (Israel et al., 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

“The process emphasized the use of village women’s documentation of their everyday lives *as an educational tool to increase their individual and collective*

knowledge [emphasis added] about women's health status and to empower women to mobilize for social change.”

Wang and Burris (1994, p. 178)

When considering common activities and potential outcomes of the individual level, some examples might include photovoice training in the philosophy of the method and appropriate advocacy skills (activities) that might lead to increased self-efficacy for being a pro-social change agent and community advocate (outcomes). While not sufficient for community change, these traits are necessary steps (mediators) within photovoice for subsequent stages of the process, such as planning events and advocating with key decision-makers of the community (Carlson et al., 2006).

Photovoice for Community Assessment

Photovoice's fundamental strength is the generation and analysis of images by community participants themselves, which not only highlight the values and priorities as identified by community members but are also used to promote community change and improvement (Strack et al., 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998, 2000). In contrast, within some settings and professions, the use of photographic images assembled by investigators for the primary purpose of data collection is referred to as *photo-elicitation* or *auto-driven photo-elicitation* (Clark & Morriss, 2015; Keller et al., 2008). Photovoice applied as part of community assessment provides not only a systematic method for data collection but also a powerful technique for self-generation of images that reflect lived experiences (Gubrium & Harper, 2013).

“As a needs assessment tool, photo novella (aka photovoice) provided a creative and appealing method by which village women and several Women's Federation cadres could document the health issues of greatest concern . . . providing an opportunity to document creatively and to discuss the community's problems, concerns, and hopes, and communicate them with policymakers.”

Wang and Burris (1994, pp. 178–179)

The role of photovoice in community assessment is to identify community strengths and weaknesses as interpreted by community members themselves. When used as a tool for assessment, the participatory nature of photovoice includes community members who may be excluded from typical surveillance activities, thereby easing participation for those who experience difficulty reading, taking a survey, responding during an interview (Wang & Pies, 2008), or who might feel disempowered by outside-directed community assessment approaches (Wang & Burris, 1997). Visual images in photovoice applications primarily concerned with community assessment are valuable for gaining an insider's perspective of salient issues; however, for full utilization of the method, further facilitation is needed to attain PSE change outcomes.

Photovoice for Community Capacity Building

Imagery, whether in media or as shared through photovoice, has a rich history of being a catalyst for social change (Bogre, 2012). Visual images are a powerful way to involve those individuals

and communities often excluded from civic discourse and are essential for capacity building within a community (Israel et al., 2005). The use of photovoice and other photography documentation methods to engage marginalized groups in community capacity building has been well established (Strack et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2000). Involvement and ownership of the participants and residents of a community at the helm of the project are essential to the success of community capacity-building efforts (Israel et al., 2005). The documentation and sharing of voices provide a platform for citizens to recognize and address power and challenge hegemonic views within society.

“From the outset, we envisioned photo novella as a method that would not only contribute to the needs assessment, but also enable women to document, discuss, and organize around their collective health interests, with the shared aim of improving life conditions in their communities.”

Wang and Burris (1994, p. 179)

Social change does not occur by happenstance. Photovoice applications should attempt to create community capacity-building conditions in which participants and the community can develop and exercise the power *to* accomplish things, the power to work *with* others toward a common goal, and the power *over* actions in one’s community (French, 1985; Wang et al., 2000). Because forces leading to PSE changes are typically located outside of the impacted community, the aim of the community capacity-development phase of the photovoice process intends to influence the critical consciousness of key decision-makers who have power *over* regulatory (laws and policies) and allocation (funding) decisions leading to more healthful PSE changes (Wang et al., 2000). Deliberate and collaborative efforts by photovoice participants, facilitators, and new allies developed through a photovoice effort are typically needed to get salient issues in front of decision-makers within a community (Wang et al., 2000). The degree to which photovoice participants are successful in harnessing and growing these sources of power and building a community’s capacity is proportional to their subsequent ability to effect positive changes for the health of individual lives and their communities.

For photovoice applications deploying a phenomenology or grounded theory approach, the participatory generation of data for understanding may satisfy an endeavor’s primary aim. However, the highest aim for Wang and Burris (1994) was the use of the photovoice method for making systemic changes that would shape healthier living conditions for women in rural China. Applying photovoice as a photovention, community assessment, or community capacity-building effort are all critical and necessary elements of the method but may not be sufficient for the planning and actions needed to evoke advocacy for change.

Photovoice for Advocacy and PSE Change

Photovoice as a means for producing systems and policy change, through individual voice, assessment, and empowerment, was the central aim of the method from the beginning. Photovoice by design provides a vehicle for members of a community to enter the civic dialogue needed for influencing decision and policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). Ideally, the photovoice process should engender empowerment, leading to opportunities for those directly affected in a community to access and influence the knowledge, decisions, networks, and

resources needed to improve local conditions, organizational practices, and communities (Strack et al., 2018; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang 2022). It is important to note that “systems” change can be large substantive changes such as changes within laws, but they can also be small wins, such as new organizational or local resources, changes within a local organization’s procedures, or even shifting a local decision-making body’s agenda.

“A central aim of photo novella was to contribute to an environment where rural women’s self-defined concerns *entered programmatic and policy discussions.*”

Wang and Burris (1994, p. 182)

Within the public health field, an increasing emphasis is placed on the importance and role of citizen advocacy that leads to positive social policy changes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Huang et al., 2015). The engagement of those most impacted by unhealthful and unfavorable social determinants is essential for improving the health of communities and society at large (Freudenberg, 2007; Huang et al., 2015). Photovoice reviews have illustrated the method’s utility (if unmet actualization) for being an effective vehicle for addressing social determinants (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather et al., 2009; Lal et al., 2012; Seitz & Strack, 2016; Wang, 2006). The photovoice method’s ability to mobilize communities to action directly impacts its potential to influence policy shifts, especially for implementations with higher participation rates; however, there has been limited measurement and reporting of salient processes for influencing policy, and limited reporting of outcomes and ultimate policy change (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). This may largely be due to the complex nature of policymaking, which has resulted in theoretical claims of influence absent empirical evidence (Guthrie et al., 2005; Reisman et al., 2007; Strack et al., 2018).

Photovoice is a practical and powerful tool for the community’s internal generation of knowledge and empowerment. The other applications of photovoice (i.e., photovention, community assessment, and community capacity building) are essential components of the method but, without additional planning and action, are by themselves less likely to achieve sustainable change leading to healthier living conditions. Using photovoice for advocacy and PSE-level change not only embraces the initial intent advocated by Wang and Burris (1994) but also results in the long-term sustainability of effects, where benefits for the community are felt well after research or intervention efforts end.

Discussion

The classification system presented here clarifies the diverse purposes of photovoice in practice and suggests to researchers more specific language for discussing its varied applications. Practitioners have acknowledged various purposes or outcomes of photovoice and used different terms to describe the wide-ranging processes; however, a necessary prerequisite of any photovoice effort is the generation of data from the members of the community itself. Not all applications of photovoice are appropriately implemented to address every level of need leading to PSEs. The classification system presented in this article highlights a hierarchical but dynamic relationship between the diverse purposes of photovoice in practice and encourages practitioners to maximize the impact of their efforts at every level.

With systems-level targets of a fully implemented photovoice application, measurement issues become more complex and challenging. Modifying or preserving policy is typically the result of numerous factors that play out in the short and long term. Mechanisms of influence are difficult to discern and do not always follow an amenable and distinct causal chain of influence. Whereas there are examples of cause-and-effect relationships between advocacy efforts and policy change, this direct relationship is often difficult to demonstrate and may be one of the challenges inherent in reporting outcomes for community-level processes like photovoice that also target policy and systems change. Many advocacy efforts occur in complex systems with multiple actors influencing the situation under study. Because these naturally occurring social-environmental influences are common threats to external validity when claiming outcomes within advocacy research (Guthrie et al., 2005; Reisman et al., 2007; Strack et al., 2018), strategies are needed to identify and measure the intermediating steps that may lead to PSE changes.

One of the main aims of Wang and Burris's (1994) photovoice efforts was to create an environment through which the voices of impacted communities could speak directly to decision- and policymakers. Because one of the main purposes of the photovoice process is to inform and influence policy shifts within a community, it is important for those carrying out photovoice efforts to monitor the steps leading to policy change as well as the policy shifts themselves. These steps can include contacts with policymakers and changes to their awareness, knowledge, and attitudes. Measurement of these preliminary changes and their ability to influence agenda-setting and the adoption of new policies or resource allocations are important for monitoring photovoice efforts. The challenging nature of evaluating PSE change and advocacy interventions may result in avoidance of these potentially more complex and longer-term evaluation designs (Guthrie et al., 2006).

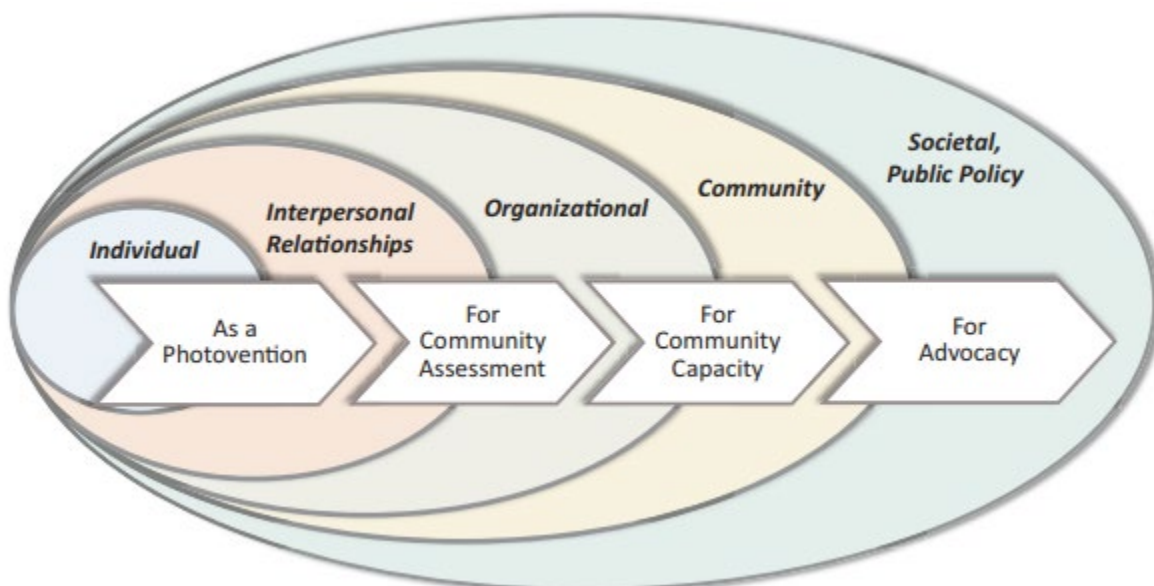


Figure 2. Photovoice Classifications Within the Social Ecological Model Framework

Considering the emphasis on advocacy for changes beyond the individual, the authors assert that SEM is an appropriate framework for distinguishing uses and intended outcomes of photovoice

(Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Strack et al., 2010). Overlaying activities and desired outcomes of the photovoice process with levels of the SEM keeps at the forefront Wang and Burris's (1994) initially stated purpose of "collective action for social change" (p. 177). Figure 2 illustrates a five-level version of the SEM, from considerations of individuals through societal and public policy influences (McLeroy et al., 1998; Sallis et al., 2008). A close examination of foundational literature and previous applications of photovoice revealed a similar pattern in which the intention was to change outcomes for individuals, collect data, build community capacity, and/or promote policy and social change (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrath et al., 2009; Lal et al., 2012; Seitz & Strack, 2016; Wang, 2006; Wang & Pies, 2008; Wang et al., 1998).

Within each level of the SEM, we can expect a degree of reciprocal interaction between levels of the environment (McLeroy et al., 1998; Stokols et al., 1996). While the direction and causal influences are not always discernible (Golden et al., 2015; Sallis et al., 2008; Weiner et al., 2012), we are working with the assertion that activities and their subsequent outcomes at each level have the potential to influence other levels; namely, that changes at one level may be a prerequisite for changes at higher levels; alternatively, factors at multiple levels may serve as an amplifier of changes at various levels (Weiner et al., 2012). Within the photovoice context, this allows us to consider the salient activities and expected outcomes at each level, and the potential positive impacts at one level influencing adjacent levels within the social environment. For example, we would expect that empowered individuals would capture salient images and stories (individual-level activities and outcomes), share their concerns with the community through public exhibits (interpersonal relationships), produce a cognitive awakening within key community stakeholders (organizations and community), and strengthen community advocacy for change which, if effective, results in community improvement (societal, public policy). Along the SEM continuum, we can carefully consider and measure expected activities and subsequent outcomes at each level, as a means for examining and strengthening strategies employed with each application of photovoice (Strack et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Since Wang and Burris's (1994) article and Wang et al.'s (2000) article in the inaugural issue of *Health Promotion Practice*, the journal and the profession have embraced and employed the power of the photovoice method. The photovoice classifications proposed here are offered as an attempt to encapsulate the diverse aims of photovoice and provide a common language. Needs assessment, dialogue, empowered action, and policy change were all seen as critical components of a photovoice effort, as Wang and Burris astutely highlighted in their 1994 article. And, as beautifully stated by Caroline Wang 28 years later in her submission to this same issue of *Health Promotion Practice*, "please look in your heart, and may your work be rooted in the goals and core values that underlie photovoice" (Wang 2022).

As a multipurpose tool, the photovoice method can illuminate complex real-world issues leading to advocacy for PSE. While change is hard, it is possible with careful planning and resolve. We hope that our proposed framing contributes to the language used to discuss photovoice and its outcomes, distinguishes its various uses and stated aims, and maximizes its impact in future applications.

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