Build the Social Justice Bridge: Participatory Photography with the International Group Work Community

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Abstract

"Build the Social Justice Bridge" was a participatory photography project that engaged international group workers in an assessment of group work as a social justice profession.

Inspired by principles of photovoice research, the project invited social work students, educators, and practitioners from around the world to contribute photographs and brief narratives that represented the relationship between group work and social justice. The photographs were exhibited during the opening session of the 2018 Symposium of the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) in South Africa, where more than 200 participants from ten countries reflected on the meaning of the photos for the group work community. In viewing the photos, symposium participants identified a common vision of

social justice as well as culturally-specific approaches to group work. Implications are drawn for the internationalization of professional knowledge.

Keywords: Group work, social action, social justice, social work, social work with groups, international social work, participatory photography, photovoice

How do international social workers understand the relationship between group work and social justice? "Build the Social Justice Bridge" was a participatory photography project that engaged international group workers in an assessment of group work as a social justice profession.

The project began with the 2018 Symposium of the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG), which was held in Kruger National Park, South Africa. In preparing for the symposium, we invited social workers from around the world to submit photographs and brief narratives that represented the symposium theme: "Bridging the Divide: Group Work and Social Justice." The photographs were exhibited during the opening session of the symposium, where participants reflected on their meaning for the group work community. In viewing and analyzing the photos, symposium participants identified a common vision of social justice as well as culturally-specific contexts for group work, and they called for the internationalization of professional knowledge. Group work may realize its promise as a social justice profession by reaching beyond Western paradigms for research, education, and practice.

What Do We Mean by Social Justice?

Social justice is a central value and principle of the social work profession (CASW, 2005; CSWE, 2015; IFSW/IASSW, 2014; IFSW, 2018; NASW, 2017). As defined in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, (IFSW, 2018) the promotion of social justice involves

challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respecting diversity, providing access to equitable resources, resisting unjust policies and practices, and building solidarity (IFSW, 2018).

According to Harriet Goodman, "Social group workers historically recognized the power of groups as vehicles for internal change and for community action to address problems" (Goodman, 2009, p. 31). With roots in the settlement house movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, group work in Great Britain, North America, and Western Europe sought to prepare people living in poverty, immigrants, and other marginalized populations for citizenship in a democracy (Coyle, 1935; Coyle, 1947; Garland, Jones, & Kolodny, 1976; Kendall, 2000; Klein, 1953; Lindeman, 1980; Lowy, 1976). Group work encouraged and empowered disenfranchised communities for economic, social, and political participation (Breton, 2017; Gitterman, 2010; Gutiérrez, 1990; Lee, 2001). In a review of group work history in the United States, Albert Alissi found that through the mid-twentieth century, group workers practiced in agencies, camps, neighborhood associations, and social clubs. These settings promoted the "group work ideals" of "voluntarism, mutual aid, democratic group participation, group selfgovernment, creative program activities, advocacy, and social action" (Alissi, 2009, p. 12; Nadel & Scher, 2019; Sullivan, Mesbur & Lang, 2009). Beginning in the 1980s, when North American group work was shifting from community-based agencies to clinical settings, some researchers feared the loss of group work as a distinctive social work and social justice method (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Goodman, 2009; Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Simon & Webster, 2009).

Group workers today pursue social justice *within* groups, through the relationships among group members, as well as *outside* of groups, through social and political advocacy in the external environment (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Ortega, 2017). Cultural context may

influence whether group workers emphasize internal or external social justice issues. According to Rebecca Smith, Justin Bucchio, and Barbara Turnage (2017), group workers in the individualistic societies of the industrial West tend to focus on small group interventions, such as task groups and process groups, while group workers in the more traditional or communitarian societies of the global South tend to identify group work with larger social and political movements (Smith, Bucchio, & Turnage, 2017, p. 45).

In South Africa, as Leila Patel explains, indigenous systems of social care that once relied on social groups and cooperative practices were disrupted by colonial rule (Patel, 2015). Under apartheid, the government provided formal social welfare programs for whites only (Govender, 2016; Hölscher & Bozalek, 2012; Patel, Kaseke, & Midgley, 2012, p. 12). The legacy of apartheid persists to this day, and despite demographic reforms, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world (Gandhi, 2018). In this context, South African group workers draw upon traditional communitarian values while promoting community development, political activism, and the protection of universal human rights (Midgley, 2013).

Practicing in such different environments, group workers throughout the world may be guided by social justice principles, but do they approach social justice in the same way? Is the meaning of social justice for small therapeutic groups in the U.S. so implicit as to disappear? Are group processes in South African community action programs a secondary concern? The 2018 IASWG Symposium in South Africa provided opportunities for international group workers to appreciate the culturally-specific contexts for group work, to learn from our common and different approaches to social justice, and to strengthen group work everywhere as a social justice profession.

Participatory Photography as a Community Assessment Tool

In preparing for the IASWG symposium, we faced the group work challenges of facilitating multilingual, multicultural communications and reaching beyond generalized consensus to reveal different points of view. Inspired by the methodology of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), we used participatory photography as a means for entering into a community assessment process.

Photovoice is a participatory research method that promotes "the ethical use of photography for positive social change" (Photovoice.org, 2019). Guided by principles of participatory action research (PAR) and community based participatory research (CBPR), photovoice "builds upon a commitment to social and intellectual change through community members' critical production and analysis of the visual image" (Wang, 2003, p. 181; Liebenberg, 2018; Mayfield-Johnsorn and Butler III, 2017; Nykiforuk, Valliantaos, and Nieuwendyk, 2011; Sutton-Brown, 2014).

Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris introduced photovoice in 1997 as a means for understanding public health issues from the perspectives of rural Chinese women (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 2003). Supported by the Ford Foundation's Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program, the photovoice process enabled women to take and share photographs of their everyday lives. Participatory photography gave women the means for recording "community strengths and concerns," engaging in critical reflection and dialogue, and communicating with policymakers (Wang and Burris, 1997, p. 369). The photovoice process was grounded in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Friere (1973), which called for continuous listening, dialogue, and action; feminist theory, which identified the personal as political (Weiler, 1988);

and documentary photography, which demonstrated the power of images as catalysts for social change (Hurley, 1972).

As Wang and Burris predicted, photovoice proved to be a "highly flexible" tool for participatory needs assessment in communities throughout the world (Wang & Burris, 1997 p. 370). In more than 20 years since the original study, photovoice has been adapted by researchers in health, education, and social science disciplines to raise awareness, agency, and self-advocacy among a wide range of communities and marginalized populations (ICR, 2019; Molloy, 2007; Photovoice.org, 2019). Some researchers, such as Linda Liebenberg (2018) and Kathleen Sitter (2017), have questioned the rigor of photovoice as a continuously evolving participatory research method. Nonetheless, photovoice has been evaluated as an effective approach for engaging with social justice issues in multicultural educational settings (Broomfiled & Capous-Desyllas, 2017; Cornell & Kessi, 2017).

With "Build the Social Justice Bridge," we used a participatory photography process that adapted principles of photovoice to an assessment of the international group work community. The project shared the three basic goals of photovoice research: 1) to "enable people to identify, represent, and enhance their community" through participatory photography; 2) to "promote critical dialogue and knowledge through large and small group discussions;" and 3) to "reach policymakers," who in this case were members and leaders of IASWG (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369; Wang, 2003, p. 185).

We followed photovoice methodology to the extent possible by purposefully recruiting photographers (through IASWG); providing for the ethical use of photography (through IRB approval); proposing an initial theme for photographs ("How does group work promote social

justice?"); selecting pictures to be exhibited (all submissions would be exhibited); reflecting on images through group discussions (at the IASWG Symposium session); reaching a target audience (IASWG Symposium participants); and entering a reiterative process of critical reflection, dialogue, and action (with a follow up session at the 2019 IASWG Symposium) (Nyiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011; Sutton-Brown, 2014; University of Kansas, 2016; Wang, 2003).

Although inspired by photovoice, our community assessment process differed from photovoice methodology in two significant respects (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 1999). First, the subject of our community assessment, the international group work community, was a relatively privileged community rather than a marginalized population. Group workers, including students, enjoy the privileges associated with professional status. Secondly, our contributing photographers were members of an international rather than a local community, and we did not expect them to come together personally to discuss their work. Those who attended the IASWG symposium would join directly in small group discussions, but others would be represented by proxies from their countries or universities. In light of these differences, we considered our use of participatory photography to be inspired by but distinct from the photovoice research method.

The Call for Photos

In February 2018, we issued an international call for photos to social work students with an interest in group work. Using the purposive and convenient sampling that is typical of photovoice (Nykiforuk, Velleanatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011; Sutton-Brown, 2014), we posted the call for photos on the IASWG website and emailed it to IASWG members with requests that

they spread the word. Submissions were to consist of: 1) a photograph or image that represents how group work promotes social justice; 2) a brief narrative of up to 50 words, 3) basic demographic information about the photographer; 4) a publication release form signed by the photographer; and 5) informed consent and publication release forms signed by any persons whose identifiable images were shown. Materials were to be sent as email attachments to the address provided. All submissions that met these criteria would be displayed at the 2018 IASWG symposium as a part of the "Build the Social Justice Bridge" symposium session.

We initially directed the call for photographs to social work students, the newest group workers, whose emerging understanding and commitment to social justice will shape the future of the profession. Students, we believed, are well positioned to view the current state of social work education and practice. At a time when they are reconciling classroom theories with the realities of field practice, students face unjust policies and living conditions that they may never have seen before. It was our hope that participatory photography would engage students, encourage their activism, and give them a sense of agency as members of the international group work community. We later extended the call to group work educators and practitioners in order to expand international participation.

Screening the Photos

Between February and April 2018, we received 51 photographs from 36 individual photographers who came from five countries: South Africa (16 photos); the United States (14), Germany (6), Israel (1), and the United Kindgdom (1). Consistent with the photovoice community assessment process, we intended to use the photographs and narratives as starting points for a community conversation rather than as replicable data for social research (Wang,

2003). We screened submissions as we received them in order to confirm that the photographs and accompanying narratives related to the topic of group work and social justice.

In our admittedly subjective reviews, nearly all the photos reflected one or more of Albert Alissi's ideals of social group work (Alissi, 2009, p. 12) – voluntarism, mutual aid, democratic group participation, self-government, creative program activities, advocacy, and social action. In addition, nearly all the photos depicted one or more of the dimensions of social justice as defined in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018) – challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respecting diversity, providing access to equitable resources, resisting unjust policies and practices, and building solidarity.

We soon discovered the difficulties of coding visual images and the limitations of categorizing the pictures by subjects or themes. "People with cameras can record settings as well as moments and ideas," as Wang and Burris explained (1997, p. 372), and the photographs that we received portrayed the culturally-specific contexts for group work practice.

Photographs of children's activity groups (evoking such themes as voluntarism, mutual aid, creative program activities, providing access) ranged from an arts and crafts group for young teens in the U.S. to a South African Christmas party for orphans with HIV. Photos of educational advocacy groups (evoking such themes as democratic participation, social action and advocacy, resisting unjust policies) ranged from eight mothers in New York City to a large public demonstration in Pretoria. In two remarkably similar pictures, young adults were gathered in a circle as they deliberated on the papers in front of them (democratic participation, self-government, building solidarity), but these groups were worlds apart, with one group sitting on chairs in a high tech classroom and the other squatting on an earthen floor.

When we sorted the photographs by country, we found that photos from South Africa, where group work is aligned with community practice, were more likely than photos from other countries to focus on specific social justice issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights or environmental justice. On the other hand, nearly identical pictures from South Africa and the U.S. showed community gardens as the settings for group work practice. Participants in the IASWG symposium would view all the photographs, reflect on regional similarities and differences, and consider implications for the international group work community.

The Symposium Session

"Build the Social Justice Bridge," the opening session of the 2018 IASWG Symposium, brought together more than 200 group workers, including students, educators, and practitioners, from ten countries: Canada, Germany, Israel, Namibia, the Netherlands, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

Service users were represented by 30 members of the local Giyani Society for the Aged Choir, who welcomed the symposium with a performance and then remained to participate in the session.

The "social justice bridge" in the title of the session was not only a reference to the symposium theme, but also a physical art installation – a wooden bridge at the entrance to the conference center. Participants entered the symposium by crossing over "the social justice bridge." They enjoyed a breakfast buffet and then gathered around tables in groups of about eight persons. Multilingual participants interpreted informally for those with limited English, and social work students assisted members of the choir.

After introducing the participatory photography process, we exhibited the photographs in a PowerPoint presentation that played continuously throughout the session. In addition, each table was provided with prints of the photos for closer review. The small groups were invited to consider how the photos portrayed group work, social justice, and the relationship between group work and social justice; and to record their impressions on large sheets of newsprint, which we collected at the end of the session. Although representatives from the small groups reported briefly to the larger group, we did not have enough time for a large group discussion. In concluding the session, we thanked participants and encouraged them to continue the dialogue in a follow-up session at the 2019 IASWG Symposium and through their local chapter activities.

Community Assessment: What Did We See?

In the months following the symposium, we reviewed the written notes from the small group discussions and coded them for common themes. Concepts that were explored by all or most groups included *empathy*, *education*, *history*, *equality*, *diversity*, *inclusion*, *giving voice*, and intentional action. In addition, most groups considered the South African worldview of *Ubuntu* or unity and oneness that has been translated as: "I am because we are" (Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013, p. 82). The themes that arose out of the small group discussions encompassed and expanded on Alissi's group work ideals (2009) and IFSW social justice principles (2018), as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Related Themes

Small Group Discussions	Group Work Ideals (Alissi, 2009)	Social Justice Principles (IFSW, 2018)
Ubuntu: We need each other to make a difference Otwa Hangana: We are united The Elephant Is Ours	Voluntarism	Build solidarity
Integration of group work and social justice: Group work can turn into social justice People come together to work for social justice	Mutual aid	Build solidarity
Empathy: All pictures show empathy Use empathy, respect, acceptance, compassion	Mutual aid	Build solidarity
Inclusion: Eradicate isolation Justice comes from inclusion Oneness in groups offers strength, courage and various solutions	Democratic participation	Build solidarity
History: Groups can overcome history Learn history and educate about skills for change	Democratic participation	Challenge discrimination and oppression
Education: Education for all is surely a bridge to justice Provide a social justice framework in education	Democratic self- government	Challenge discrimination and oppression
Empowerment: The transformative power of group experience Build support and empowerment The coming together of marginalized groups	Democratic self- government	Equitable access
Equality: Social justice is viewed as equality Bring people into equality Balance resources for the vulnerable	Democratic self- government	Equitable access
Giving Voice: Hear the voiceless Telling our stories, being heard as we intended We form bonds without words	Creative program activities	Respect diversity
Diversity: Common focus, different perspectives Connect with people different from ourselves People of different backgrounds come together to take action	Advocacy and social action	Respect diversity
Intentional action: Intention is an important ingredient Help group workers think about intentions Witness social injustice and turn it into action	Advocacy and social action	Challenge unjust policies and practices

Viewing the photos through the lens of "experiential knowledge" (Photovoice, 2018; Sutton-Brown, 2015; Wang & Burns, 1997), the small groups discussed group work and social justice as integrated processes: "Groups turn into social justice"; "People come together as a group to work on social justice issues." The small groups identified *empathy* as the basis for all group activities: "All pictures show empathy"; "Use empathy, respect, acceptance, and compassion." Similarly, the concept of *inclusion* applied to the process and purpose of group work: "Eradicate isolation"; "Justice comes from inclusion"; "Oneness in groups offers strength, courage, and various solutions."

Historical South African photographs from the anti-apartheid era led groups to consider history and the possibilities for change: "Groups can overcome history"; "Learn history and educate about skills for change." Consistent with the teachings of Paulo Friere (1973, 1974), many small groups identified education as a means and end in group work: "Education for all is surely a bridge to social justice." Education leads to empowerment, "the transformative power of the group experience."

Many groups defined social justice as *equality*: "Social justice is viewed as equality"; "Bring people into equality"; "Balance resources with equality for the vulnerable." Equality in education was specified as a social justice goal.

As interpreted by the small groups, the photographs illustrated the concept of *giving voice*: "Telling our stories in our own words and being heard as we intended"; "We can form bonds without words." Giving voice makes it possible for groups to draw on their *diversity*, to learn from "a multitude of perspectives and vantage points." The small groups discussed diversity not only as a value to be respected, as in the IFSW definition of social justice (2018),

but also as a resource to be harnessed: "Work collaboratively with other cultures"; "People of different backgrounds come together to take action." In the views of symposium participants, group work leads to social justice through *intentional action*: "Intention is an important ingredient"; "Witness social injustice and turn it into action." Above all, the South African philosophy of *Ubuntu* inspired symposium participants to seek a global social justice culture for group work that arises out of the culturally-specific experiences of group work practice.

A purpose of the symposium session, in the words of Caroline Wang, was "to produce and analyze visual images that build upon a commitment to social and intellectual change" (Wang, 2003, p. 181). In assessing the group work community, symposium participants called for social and intellectual change associated with the internationalization of professional knowledge. Small group discussions affirmed current efforts by IASWG to improve financial, linguistic, and geographical access to IASWG's programs and resources for international group workers, and they encouraged scholarship that reaches beyond prevailing Western paradigms for research, education, and practice.

Community Assessment: What Did We Miss?

As in our early efforts to categorize the photographs, our thematic analysis of notes from the small group discussions told only part of the story. Symposium participants interpreted the photos through both *analysis* and *synthesis*. In reflecting on the photos, they identified not only discrete concepts, but also the relationships among concepts. Out of 26 small groups, eight groups recorded their discussions with visual images – a flowering plant, a human figure, an idea map, or concentric circles – rather than with verbal lists. We could code

the words on the flowering plant, but not the relationships among the words, as depicted in branches and stems.

Even when they recorded their discussions in words, some small groups alluded to culturally-specific references that may have been lost in translation. One small group began its notes with the intriguing statement: "The elephant is ours: Let us finish it together." What did this mean and how did it relate to other themes? With a little research, we learned that "The Elephant Is Ours" is a local folktale about an elephant who is trampling a farmer's crops. The farmer must rely on help from other villages to deal with the elephant. He cannot cope alone. The story is an allegory for the philosophy of Ubuntu, "I am because we are." Might the elephant also represent social injustice? Is the principle of social justice, like the philosophy of Ubuntu, more fully expressed metaphorically or allegorically than literally or analytically?

In *The Child's Concept of Story,* a classic study of children's use of language, Arthur Applebee explained that "we function psychologically by building systematic representations of experience" (Applebee, 1978, p. 3). We use different kinds of language to express different types of "systematic representations." Transactional language, the language of logic and science, is used to represent objective reality. We respond to transactional language analytically and critically, by separating out and testing each idea. In contrast, artistic or poetic language, the language of visual images and stories, calls for appreciating the work as a whole and the interrelated patterns within its composition. Although it is possible to view art intellectually and to analyze it in transactional terms, we also engage with the artist's vision emotionally through our personal and social memories. Works of art evoke our subjective, inner worlds (Doel, 2017). Symposium participants viewed the photographs both as

documentary evidence and as works of art, and some small groups responded in an artistic language of their own.

Conclusions

"Build the Social Justice Bridge" used participatory photography to engage the international group work community in an assessment of group work as a social justice profession. In response to an IASWG call for photos, 36 social workers submitted photographs and brief narratives that represented their views of group work and social justice. The photos were exhibited at the 2018 IASWG Symposium, where more than 200 participants from ten countries, including 30 South African service-users, reflected on the meaning of the photos for the group work community.

Symposium participants shared a common understanding of group work as a profession that is guided by the principle of social justice. In general, they discussed social justice as a value or principle, rather than as a set of specific, measurable goals. In applying principles of social justice to the international group work community, symposium participants supported initiatives to improve the accessibility of IASWG programs for group workers outside of North America. The photographs raised participants' awareness of the differences in the social, economic, and political environments for group work practice and the opportunities for learning that these differences provide. A significant finding from the symposium was the value of accepting both scientific and artistic systems of representation for communicating experiential knowledge. Symposium participants viewed the photographs both as documentary evidence and as works of art, and they discussed the photos in the objective, scientific language of academia and in the subjective, poetic language of stories. With their affirmation of

internationalism, their belief in empathy and diversity as resources for social action, and their confidence in the possibilities for creating a more equitable society, symposium participants took a hopeful stance against the rise of ethnocentrism and nationalism in their home countries and throughout the world.

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