The Voice Collaboration:
A Discussion to Include Marginalized Voices Through Photography

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This project aimed to incorporate the voices of women in an underprivileged Appalachian city neighborhood, MidTown, into local policy discussion. To incorporate these marginalized voices, documentary photography was used as an alternative or supplemental form of communication as well as a tool for problem identification and solving.

The discussions resulted in six possibilities for government policy.

The report aims to be grouped into sections relevant to readers' interests.

Working with Photography as Voice

Brief Introduction

Women used photography as a way to explore and express issues in their neighborhood. After many issues became saturated through the photographs, conversation topics were able to turn to grouping issues in different themes. From these themes, the women regrouped photographs and ideas until they found six policy possibilities they felt could address the issues of MidTown.

Design

General Set Up: Each Tuesday, upon conclusion of the collective conversation, a question would emerge about the neighborhood and the women would go home and photograph further points of interests related to the question or possible answers. The following Monday, I would upload all the photographs to Dropbox, and that Tuesday we would meet and project the photographs on the wall for discussion. Once the photograph issues became redundant, we printed the photographs and began having the women take time to place them in piles and to write a few words and ideas down before sharing. One evening, several of the women actually took turns facilitating.

In our final conversations, the women were ready and able to speak with little or no reference to the photographs as the issues seemed very fresh and real on their minds.

To articulate the possibilities, the women worked together to arrange photographs, quotations, and text to explain the reality and possibilities for MidTown. A final photo-walk was taken through MidTown to capture any last needed images as well as turn-in any borrowed equipment. Final revisions to the policies happened mostly independently through a free, collaborative software called Prezi.

Recruiting: Recruiting methods employed mostly snowball and door knocking (see more about this in *Women of MidTown* section). Recruiting proved very difficult for 'an outsider'. Many of the women were interested in honing their photography skills and the idea of having a professional work with them and the idea of having a public portfolio was a big pull.

Orientation: Documentary Photographer and College Professor, Pradip Malde, joined our group to introduce the women to the idea of photographing MidTown as well as how to set-up their camera for the best quality shots.

The orientation evening began with a photography walk through the neighborhood. After the walk, we uploaded our photographs and Pradip shared insight into what we were doing well and things to watch for as we photographed. Over dinner, City Councilwoman Sharyn Tallman shared her story of growing up a foster child in MidTown and now representing the district as one of the first female representatives in city government.

The women left having signed contracts to participate in most of the meetings, release their photographs to the group, and to check-out needed equipment (memory cards and/or cameras). Also, the women were charged with the homework assignment of photographing

Childcare & Dinner

Dinner was almost always catered by MidTown Chefs or Dinners and was always excellent! Childcare was provided when needed for the mothers of children still at home.

Working with Women of MidTown

Participants: Snowball sampling resulted in 10 women with an investment in the underprivileged 'MidTown' area, living and/or working in the neighborhood. At the time of their sign-up, they asked to be provided with a memory card that would fit their camera or provide them with a camera (only two wanted a camera). Also, they either accepted friend requests through a Facebook page or responded to phone texts. At the first meeting, only 6 women attended. Of the four missing women, one or two asked to be considered at a later time but because they had missed a great deal and their 'away' messages on their phones were so concerning, we were advised that we should move forward with the 6. It was evident that communication and an understanding of 'professionalism' was very different for some these women.

Participant A: Divorced, White, 30yrs, Mother of 10 year old mixed race daughter; was raised in and works as an AmeriCorps volunteer in MidTown. She has a grade average of 4.0 at Mountain State College and is trying to transfer to WVUP. She enjoys volunteering and photography. She was always present and on time, and has impressed her boss enough that they may offer her a fulltime job after AmeriCorps hours are completed. By the end of the project, she said she would be interested in learning to facilitate.

Participant B:Single, White, 20yrs, participant in transitional housing in MidTown with the West Virginia Children's Home Society. She joined because of an interest in photography and a desire to boost her resume. Now that she lives in Parkersburg (by invitation of her boyfriend), she hopes to enroll in WVUP since she is unemployed.

Participant C: Married, White, 28yrs, stay at home mother also runs a photography and recording studio in her MidTown home. She is a mother of a 2.5 year old and is expecting her second. She was the only participant with a four-year college degree, and she used to travel with a family gospel band. She joined because she is interested in learning documentary style photography and she wants to see MidTown get its own identity and become a better place to raise a family.

Participant D: Married, White, 50-60yrs, recently unemployed, lived in MidTown for 30+years, where she raised her children. She and her husband have a passion for building community and her contribution to the conversation often revealed that she was well-read in community development issues. While nervous about the photography aspect, her photos were excellent and she asked if she could buy the camera as she hoped to continue photographing. Her attendance was spotty, as she was struggling with surgery, but she did meet online through Skype when she was homebound.

Participant E: Married, White, 27yrs, stay at home mother of two. She was raised in MidTown and often helped her parents run a business in MidTown until her back herniated midway through our discussions. She joined because of an interest in improving her photography skills and because she cares for the community. She did not participate after her health issues.

Participant F: Married, White, 27 yrs, stay at home mother of two. She was raised in MidTown and was very close friends with Participant E. She joined because her friend was and she wanted something to do. Her insight into the community and her enthusiasm for having a group of girlfriends to gather each week was inspiring. Sadly, she didn't participate after her friend dropped.

Guest Participant: White, 50ish, women who counseled kids in MidTown before working on a few boards in Parkersburg. Her insight to the issues of MidTown was perhaps not new, but quite affirming that the women were on the right track.

Examining 'Under-Resourced'

MidTown is an under-resourced area of Parkersburg. Stakeholders in this area are interesting to consider in light of political conversations because they are not typically those included in policy conversations. Not being too certain why this was, I set out to include some of the voices that were most marginalized—women in under-resourced Appalachia.

I believe that I found that some marginalized women can be better included in conversations; however, I also found out why many voices are not included.

In an appreciative inquiry, I examined the two most committed participants, Participants A and C, wondering what made them different. I found that ***Employment and Education surfaced as voice indicators.*** Interestingly, the two factors that set these two participants off from the pack (other than their impeccable attendance) were that they were both working and both had some college education. It was almost ironic that these were the two with daily responsibilities outside their homes as well as being almost solely responsible for their children, yet they were the most committed and well attending participants. Both of these women are about 30 years old, somewhat reserved in mannerisms, demonstrated helpful behaviors when setting up and cleaning up meetings, both having some college education, having an appreciation for hard work, church attendance, volunteer efforts, and were willing to take responsibility for independent tasks. I believe both could be trained to facilitate future conversations.

Under-resourced is often a blanketed term that should be explored more carefully in its various facets. Ruby Payne identifies seven potential resources that should be available to people: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationship/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules (see Payne, 2005, in appendix).

IF Discussions often aim to address several of these resource areas: offering *financial* incentives or reimbursements for attendance; offer childcare for those in need of support systems; and explaining and reinforcing some of the *rules* of conversation.

The maturation of this group dealt more with lack of resources for their *emotional*, *mental*, *physical*, and even *knowledge of hidden rules*. Some of the women initially took time off for 'personal' *emotional* or *mental* reasons. Some broke *hidden rules* by leaving very unprofessional voicemail messages or texts; therefore, when they sought entrance into the group after orientation, they were considered a risk to the morale of the group and not permitted. Finally, several of those who could and would attend, suffered *physical* health issues that prevented them from attending. Naturally, education about their health and access to health resources as well as *financial* means of paying for health resources played a huge role. One woman had to travel far to find health providers who would work with her. Another woman sat out a lot longer than intended because she had to wait for insurance to kick-in for her husband's new job. Her parents wanted her husband to work for the family business, but they could not offer him health benefits. Against their wishes, and at risk for losing their support, he gained employment elsewhere to receive the opportunity for her to have surgery on her herniated discs. Without her attendance, her friend would not come.

This anecdote indicates that often a lack of resources snowballs into larger issues that keep voices muted or physically absent from policy conversations.

Lesson Learned

Resources: Being financially under-resourced is a relatively easily issue for IF to address and should be considered when recruiting participants; however, those who may be under-resourced in one of the other six dimensions may take a little more creativity and effort on the facilitator's part to include (e.g. checking in frequently with participant, especially the day and/or morning before each meeting; connecting participant with others who might meet their needs).

Voice versus Photography:
Increased Participation. Some of the women joined a pilot group in which the discussion was held very similar to the IF Discussion style. These women, as well as the larger group, were not only more active in the discussions with photographs, but their input often advanced the discussion more often. The photographs served as a space for them to speak, and allowed them room to bring up new topics that they may have discounted or held private in a larger group.
Agreement. One drawback, perhaps, was that there was much less controversy. The photograph conversations were more often affirmed than challenged.

Participant Photography:
Primed Conversation. Additionally, allowing participants to photograph before coming to meetings prepares the participants for a fruitful conversation. The women spent many days before meetings pondering the issues and pushing themselves to photograph issues which primed them for conversation and gave them days to better articulate their thoughts.

Changing Viewpoints. The women often reported that the photography and conversation not only forced them to go into different places in their neighborhoods, but also to see their neighborhood with different eyes. Many reported not being able to pass an empty lot or abandoned house without imagining the possibilities. This came in part with having the women place photographs of things they loved beside things they would love to change and they began to make connections of how the things they would love to change could become things they love. This gave these MidTowners a more optimistic view of their neighborhood and hope that things could get better.

Collaborative Articulation. Sometimes the women would shoot or view a photograph of something that moved them, but they could not explain why they felt moved. Through answering questions from the group, they were able to articulate what it was about the photograph that they found soulful. In other words, what was an abstract notion was able to be articulated better through taking the first step of photography. Where there were not words, they found words together. Often, the group would re-assign a meaning to a photograph that perhaps was not in the photographer's intentions. By framing parts of the neighborhood in a camera lens, the group was often able to frame the problems and solutions in ways that were not so simply framed from an abstract conversation. These photographs would start at as a specific subject, but would then become generalized as others would chime in about similar experiences. These photographs would then take on several stories.

Concrete turned Conceptual. Most of the photographs began with specific issues and then moved to more abstract issues. If a photographer had an abstract issue in mind, it was more difficult to photograph as she often turned to metaphorical photographs. Some of the favorite photographic renderings were specific issues that represented an abstract or metaphorical issue as well. For example, a photograph of a torn basketball net with a dreamy cast not only represented the poor shape of basketball areas but also represented the dream of having places for people to play and congregate; these places had existed but there had been a tear in the society and these places and

activities had become neglected, much like the fragmented neighborhood today; however, dreams of revitalization remain.

Participant

One very under-resourced participant often exhibited a survival technique of making up wild explanations and stories about her life. While this proved a bit challenging for the social cohesion of the group (she would *always* create a fantastical story for while she deserved any dinner leftovers or why she missed meetings), she did prove to be a very creative thinker when it came to creating new ideas and thinking outside of the box. This creative, redeeming aspect bought her a place in the group.

Six Possibilities

*"We are all faced with a series of great opportunities
brilliantly disguised as impossible situations."*
Charles R. Swindoll

This perspective is one of women in MidTown, a region of Parkersburg in which the area is often under-resourced, and women are not trained to enter into policy conversations. The possibilities arose from discussions about documentation from the neighborhood. The six possibilities were a unanimous creation and came about very easily and quickly (7 minutes?) on the last formal day of conversation. I attribute the quick articulation to the steeped experience of talking about these issues from multiple standpoints (through photographs and through conversation) over previous weeks as well as the personal investment in the topic.

The participants gathered, some by Skype if homebound, and discussed generating several possibilities for policy makers to consider. This was not difficult considering our discussions had made us quite aware of the issues and potential solutions.

As representatives of MidTown, we perceive that MidTown is quite fragmented and lacking the social unity needed to move grassroots efforts. Many of the issues are social issues that need to be addressed partly by the effort of the neighbors, but with the lack of funds, resources, education, consistent enforcement, etc., we need additional help from government entities. Therefore, we felt that it could not be merely grassroots or merely policy makers trying to revitalize MidTown.

Five or six possibilities were generated for policy makers to assist grassroots type efforts in the neighborhood.

Possibility A: Foster Interface with Policy Makers

More interface time between MidTowners and Policy Makers would not only boost morale but boost results. Policy makers would simply need to help coordinate Speak Outs or social events at which political representatives would mingle with the neighbors and/or even poll their opinions.

Morale from both parties would be boosted. MidTowners would no longer feel that they are not heard and policy makers would no longer feel as if the MidTowners did not try to get involved; truly there has been a misunderstanding. If neighbors could feel they could be heard and there was follow up on their opinions and concerns, they would join more policy conversation more often.

Possibility B: Foster Social Gatherings

MidTown lacks a central gathering space. Smaller groups are welcome to meet at available churches and resource centers; however, there is no space for larger groups. The government could help provide a large space. This may be a permanent space, or may just be providing the law enforcement to block off streets for cookouts or block parties. This assistance for social gatherings seemingly for the people and by the people, with care from the government would boost morale and foster the unity in a fragmented area of town.

Food is a great way to bring people together. Block parties, Valentine's Day dinners, and cookouts would be a great way to get people out of their homes and into the community. This can strengthen the pride in MidTown by providing opportunities for the citizens to get to know their neighbors. Events like block parties could also act as a way to get to know the issues important to MidTown by offering free food in exchange for a completed survey asking questions about what isn't working in MidTown and how to fix it.

Music: The musical talent in MidTown is amazing. Concerts of local bands or even band competitions could bring the people together and encourage musicians to use and improve their talents.

Family fun Days: Designated family days would be a great way to get families out and encourage people to get back to simple basics. Board games, thumb wars, hop scotch, etc. are examples of possible stations for family fun activities.

Community Gardens: community gardens have been attempted in the MidTown area, but with little success. More awareness and education about the gardens might boost participation. Neighbors could be instructed how to participate, contribute, and share the rewards so the garden can do good for the community. This could encourage healthy eating habits and foster interactivity and communication among neighbors.

Possibility C: Identify and Equip Community Leaders to Advocate & Educate

Grassroots leaders need help to emerge and blossom. This possibility takes city officials out of a passive role in grassroots efforts and asks them to collaborate with the attitude that they do whatever may be possible to find and equip community leaders whether that is offering scholarships for existing training or creating separate training programs. Community leaders would be resourcers helping community members find out about available resources (e.g. available loans or access to policy enforcement). The leaders would also serve as advocates for the community in situations such as dealing with landlords who are not following rent laws as well as meeting with city council representatives.

Too Many Voices. It may be helpful to have someone to represent the families, the businesses, and the children of MidTown. That way, the people can have a voice and the policy makers can hear it.

Phone Between. MidTown has needs and both the citizens and policy makers know that the needs exist. Perhaps, though, they don't know how to communicate with each other to get the needs met. It's like they are separated by distance with no phone to unite their voices. Situations like this could cause citizens of MidTown to feel forgotten, to feel left out, and to feel abandoned. They may try things to gain the attention of those policy makers. Violence, crime, etc may be the only way some know how to ask for help. Others may just give up and think a better community is not an option, that nothing can be done. So, those people don't contribute to bettering the community. Whichever path the citizens choose to take, neither leads to a better MidTown. A community leader could act as the middle man for the two groups. They could provide a means of communication...they could be the phone.

"Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."
-- Attributed to Margaret Mead

Possibility D: Amplify Use and Promote Awareness of Existing Resources

Many existing efforts and resources are underutilized. This policy would ask the city to find ways to make the existing resources further available and relevant to community members. This idea suggests that enough resources and programs exist to meet all the needs however community members are not able to take advantage of the resources.

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" Aldo Leopold.

Neighborhood Watches: with a reinstated neighborhood watch, theft as well as tagging and graffiti vandalism would be cut down.
Otherwise, consider giving those people an outlet for their art or (in some cases) anger.

Business Support: Home-based businesses could benefit from small business support.
Markets: The Winter Market and Farmers' Market are examples of existing venues to generate income; however, some cannot afford the insurance associated with selling food stuffs.

Vacant Buildings, Lots, and Office Spaces: These could be put to use.

Possibility E: Involve MidTowners help Determining Improvements

Grassroots efforts could help identify needed infrastructure improvements as well as provide manpower for volunteer efforts (tear-down, clean-up, or build). Government entities can help with permits, grant writing, and funds for some physical infrastructure improvements (e.g. the Targeted Neighborhood efforts). Members in this neighborhood are very skilled in such types of manual labor and equally as hard working; allowing them to use their gifting to improve the physical infrastructure would not only keep them involved and invested, it could boost morale.

Cleaning Efforts. Garbage and Broken Glass around abandoned or condemned houses is dangerous for children and adults as well. We'd help clean it up!!

Recycle. Reuse. Repurpose. Instead if marking houses/larger buildings as Uninhabitable. Demolish the homes and use the lots, or remodel the homes for usage as office/business space.

Sidewalks. The condition of the sidewalks is a major issue in MidTown. The cracks make riding bikes or pushing strollers very difficult and in some places the sidewalk ends on one side of the street and forces citizens to cross the street to get to an existing sidewalk. Crossing could be dangerous, especially for children walking home from school. New and improved sidewalks could assist those who don't have vehicles, encourage healthy activities such as biking or taking walks as a family and/or improve the safety of the people of MidTown.

Vandalism. Graffiti and vandalism are often the product of youth who are bored and who were not taught to respect other people's property. Programs to discourage and clean up graffiti and vandalism would address the existing issue and help prevent future incidents.
Similar communities designate a graffiti wall for youth to express themselves. Options such as this should also be explored.

Possibility F: Community Center

Policy makers could help equip MidTown with a community center. Such a center would be a positive place that would address many of the current issues and would promote a better existence and healthier future for MidTowners. Recently, the CVS closed to reopen in a better market and less theft. Other businesses struggle with theft and even vandalism, so there now exists many rotting 'empty shells' that are none less enticing for other businesses. Such shells could easily be converted into something positive that would address the social issues that have fostered an environment prevalent with poverty, theft, and vandalism. A community center could be a centralized place for adults to gather as their children do at boys and girls clubs. The center would help people grow by providing opportunities that expand their cultural, social, or even educational horizons. This will foster better citizenship and a place for people of all ages and backgrounds to interact.

"...A community needs a soul if it is to become a true home for human beings. You, the people must get it this soul." Pope John Paul II

"Young people, who are still uncertain of their identity, often try on a succession of masks in the hope of finding the one which suits them the one, in fact, which is not a mask."
Wystan Hugh Auden

Identity as Foundation. An old Proverb that says, "If the shoe fits, wear it." Well, apparently the shoe doesn't fit MidTown. Something isn't working. People are hurting; there is no pride, no hope. Something needs to be done. Gloria Steinem once said, "If the shoe doesn't fit, must we change the foot?" Maybe this is true. Maybe we are beyond making small changes to improve the town. Maybe we need to change the foundation. To bring peace, hope and pride back in to the heart and soul of the individuals that make up MidTown. An identity...a positive one...needs to be found and established for the people so they can know that they matter and they know they have something to contribute. A community center could help establish this. By providing a place where families can come together and reunite, where individuals can talk to others in support groups, where people can be encouraged to participate in physical activity to make their bodies healthier, where classes can be offered to help people of all ages learn life skills and establish and grow their talents, and where all of this can be offered in a place close to home at a very affordable price.

Resources. A community center could offer resources for the citizens to be able to start their own businesses doing things they love and are good at. It can also offer seminars, classes, workshops, etc to give them the knowledge and resources to keep their businesses open. These "home-grown" products and services could provide a sense of pride and purpose for the citizens of MidTown.

Education*.* A Center could teach life skills relevant to the neighborhood. Take fire safety, for example. Fires are an everyday threat to our neighborhood. The last prevention training we had was in elementary school. Prevention campaigns could be more prevalent...

Social Support. A center could off an alcohol-free space for adults to meet, a place to gather as friends to receive social and emotional support.

Continuing Opportunities

Continued Effort
The group worked together to create a Prezi presentation using their photographs and testimonies. This Prezi was sent to the Mayor's office to view and respond.

Controversy
A small speed bump is that it is an election year and the incumbent mayor is running against Sharyn Tallman who is the city councilwoman for the district of much of MidTown. Attention to MidTown issues is going to be hairy.

Gallery
The women might like to host a gallery of their photos in the City Building or somewhere they could garner some attention.

Project/Citizen Discussions
Another opportunity that could easily move the discourse forward without getting too political would be allowing two or three of the participants to host project discussions about the possibilities to improve the report and foster more dialogue around the revitalization possibilities.

If such groups would like to gain recognition, it might be beneficial to reserve space at Panera Bread and/or Spat's because these two areas are the social hubs of Parkersburg; if discussions were hosted here, the city would know about them quickly.

Other Neighborhoods
Another opportunity would be to replicate the experience in other neighborhoods or towns in efforts to foster communication as well as to explore this new methodology and how it works in other groups.

Appendix

Payne, R. K. (2005). A framework for understanding poverty. (4th ed.). Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc.

Page 7: Define poverty as 'the extent to which an individual does without resources.' She highlights 8 potential resources:
1. **Financial**: having the money to purchase goods and services
2. **Emotional**: being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and shows itself through stamina, perseverance, and choices.
3. **Mental**: Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal with daily life
4. **Spiritual**: Believing in divine purpose and guidance [p8. Personal worth and value].
5. **Physical**: Having physical health and mobility.
6. **Support Systems**: Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.
7. **Relationships/Role Models**: having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing to the child, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.
8. **Knowledge of Hidden Rules**: knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group.

It may be that some dimension are 1) not developed, 2) access was not maintained because on survival mode or focus was shifted and relationship with these others was forsaken. So helping one in one area is a blessing but is not help*.*