# Using Participatory Action Research to Teach Community Practice in a Post-Truth Era

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**Abstract**. *This project focuses on the learning experiences of master of social work students in an advanced community practice course. The primary pedagogical method for the class was participatory action research, specifically the photovoice method. The MSW students completed a photovoice project focused on campus sexual violence in which they recruited students, outside the class, as participants. As coursework, students generated reflection papers, responses to readings, and focus group notes. These artifacts constituted the data for this project. The data analysis included grounded theory methods and a focus on post-truth politics, from which three categories emerged: (a) supporting cultural competence, (b) facilitating self-awareness (c) and viewing truth as multi-faceted.*

**Keywords:** *photovoice, participatory action research, community practice, social work education.*

## Introduction

As educators, when we choose a specific framework to guide our teaching, we are careful to consider which approach facilitates particular learning outcomes for our students. However, when the course is comprised of a complex intersection between theories, professional values, skill building, and community-based learning experiences, it is challenging to locate frameworks that encompass all of these factors. Further, teaching community prac-

tice in a "post-truth" era creates additional challenges related to how students determine processes for their professional development and growth. This paper focuses on the efforts of one instructor to evaluate the impact of using a specific framework aimed at integrating a multi-level, culturally competent approach to community practice for social work students. This study illustrates the experiences and perceptions of master of social work (MSW) students with implementing and evaluat-

ing a participatory action research (PAR) photovoice project within an advanced community practice course. The instructor chose to use PAR because this methodology does integrate theories, values, skills, and community-based experiences into social work practice with communities. Also, the PAR methodology is founded on critical pedagogical theory and practices and privileges the experiences and perspectives of a given community in defining and resolving community problems. Critical pedagogical theory and practice address issues related to post-truth politics by challenging how "truth" is constructed.

The purpose of this paper is to use a grounded theory approach to examine the role of participatory action research (PAR) in teaching community practice in a post-truth era. The research question guiding this study is the following: what do graduate students perceive as the role of PAR in learning community practice in a post-truth era? This project focuses on the learning experiences of 55 graduate students enrolled in an MSW course centered on teaching community practice theories and skills. The instructor of the class showed the students how to develop, implement, and evaluate a PAR project. This effort was the primary pedagogical method for teaching community practice. The methodology used to shape the project was PAR, and the specific techniques included photovoice. The topic for the project was centered around transforming campus rape culture. The instructor chose this topic because of a campus climate survey they implemented in 2015, illustrating that eight percent of women and two percent of men had experienced coercive sexual contact (Christensen, Harris & Hernandez 2015)

while attending university. Also, over 70% of students reported that they had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment during their time as a student (Christensen et al. 2015). With this empirical information, we know that sexual violence is a problem for the campus community.

The project involved teaching the MSW students how to implement and evaluate a photovoice project, which included teaching them how to recruit and train university students, between the ages of 18–24 years old, to be the photovoice participants; the particular age group fits within the range most at risk of being victimized by sexual assault (Cantor et al. 2015). The MSW students taught the participating students how to generate data in the form of photographs and through a focus group discussion. The MSW students also identified stakeholders and invited them to an end-of-semester event, where the photographer-students displayed their pictures, and attendees were encouraged to discuss how the photographs related to understanding campus rape culture. The researchers used a constructivist methodology to design this study and grounded theory methods to analyze the coursework produced by the MSW students in three separate courses.

## Background

To use qualitative research, specifically PAR, and to teach community practice, one must combine the processes of gathering data with helping the community to organize around identified issues (Minkler 2000). Social work education on community practice focuses on teaching students the values, knowledge, and skills neces-

sary to build relationships with communities, help communities to identify issues they wish to change, to harness community strengths, and develop resources to create the change (Ohmer, Reisch & Weil 2013).

## Social Work Education

Social work education focuses on teaching students the knowledge, values, and skills associated with social work practice. This education aims to prepare students to adopt a wide variety of theoretical frameworks for evaluating human behavior in the social environment and to develop, implement, and evaluate the planned change, problem-solving process with individuals, families, groups, communities, institutions, and social policies (Council on Social Work Education 2015). Social work students take courses that illustrate the values, theories, and techniques associated with creating progressive transformation at all levels of social interaction. Community practice courses focus on problem-solving and planned change processes.

## Qualitative Research and Community Practice

Qualitative research focuses on the in-depth, subjective points of view people develop as part of their lived experiences and while making meaning of those experiences. This approach allows researchers to build a rich understanding of the topic or population under investigation, illuminating the sense people make of their lives – exploring the significance attached to values, attitudes, behaviors, events, activities, and traditions (Leavy 2017). Qualitative research paradigms and study designs take an inductive approach to the

research process and strive to generate thick, multi-layered, meaningful data that describe phenomena (Leavy 2017). Community practice is the systematic effort to develop, organize, and plan for progressive change within communities (Weil, Reisch & Ohmer 2013). Planning and organizing for dynamic change involves gathering rich, in-depth, descriptive information about the community, their values, norms, and traditions (Gamble 2013). Also, practitioners must help the community to identify what issues exist and what resources are needed to address the problems. This planning and organizing often involve the same methodology and methods used in qualitative research. Therefore, teaching students foundational skills for community practice is parallel to educating students with foundational skills for conducting qualitative research.

## The Role of Qualitative Research and Social Work in a Post-Truth Era

Post-truth politics refer to the way politicians use the enormous amounts of data generated by smart technologies to shape the policy platforms on which they campaign for office (Davies 2016). For example, the Trump campaign used smart technology data to determine the conservative constituency's emotional sentiment behind controversial voting issues. Instead of presenting the contextualized and complete findings of empirical research on these issues, the Trump campaign cherry-picked research results, de-contextualized them, and used them to incite fear or anger in the conservative base (Todd, Murray & Dunn 2017). Qualitative research is in a unique position to counter the efforts of populist

political movements to cherry-pick data. Qualitative research is inextricably linked to the context in which researchers conduct a given study. This type of research does not seek to generalize. Instead, it aims to illuminate the unique lived experiences of the group with whom research takes place. Also, qualitative research is not centered on finding the "truth"; it seeks to illuminate the multiple truths that exist for a given group of people at a given point in time. Since qualitative research does not rely on establishing an objective truth that exists beyond the context of a given study, the results of qualitative research are less susceptible to "outsider" interpretation. It is more difficult to cherry-pick findings from qualitative research, because embedded in the conclusions is the context of the study. In the case of the current project, teaching students how to use qualitative research as a tool for community practice helps students move away from making assumptions about what is best for the community. Through having students implement a PAR photovoice project, students learn that the data generated by the community is an authentic and credible way of understanding the community rather than only relying on facts and figures produced by experts that exist outside the community. Learning to employ a PAR project helps the students see that knowledge cultivated about a given community should include the community in that knowledge generation.

The International Federation of Social Work (2018) developed a core set of principles that align with the values and practices of countering the detrimental aspects of post-truth politics. For example, the principle "Treating People as Whole Persons" (p. 1/1) emphasizes working with communities from a multi-dimensional, contextual perspective. This approach considers the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of a community's history and day-to-day existence. Social workers are to use this framework for assessments, interventions, and evaluation of practice. Using a holistic view of human behavior considers the context in which the community creates meaning and addresses community problems. Including a contextual understanding in practice counters a decontextualized, presumptuous approach to community practice. Instead, this approach promotes the right for communities to define what is "truth" for them and use that truth to build feasible solutions to community problems.

## Conceptual Framework for PAR and Photovoice

PAR methodology is a branch of qualitative research methodology that focuses on engaging the research participants as the researchers. Researchers derived the PAR methodology from Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), which emphasizes fostering the critical consciousness of a given community through dialogue about issues, with oppression being grounded in their lived experiences. The critical consciousness process involves engaging in a critical reflection and discussion about the participants' visions of opportunity, equity, and justice, and identifies solutions that are feasible and strengths-based. A hallmark of the PAR methodology is the involvement of community members throughout the research process – from the conceptualization of research questions to data collection and analyses, dissemination,

and, ultimately, in the practical application of knowledge to benefit the community (Minkler 2000). The photovoice method involves a lead researcher in recruiting a small group of community members to document their perceptions and experiences about their community through taking photographs and describing (narrating) the photographs, then displaying the photographs for stakeholders. After the public display, the community members critically reflect on the data they presented and the new data they gathered from the stakeholder's response to the photographs. This critical reflection is used to develop a tangible list of solutions targeting the problem (Wang & Burris 1997; Wang 1999). PAR methodology is aligned with the values and goals of community practice. This methodology also has the potential to illuminate the intellectual and practical challenges involved with training social workers to help communities make progressive change in a post-truth era.

## Previous Research

Social work has a small but growing history of implementing and evaluating PAR methods as a pedagogical tool. This research shows that engaging students in using PAR increases students' self-awareness as learners and as community practitioners (Bromfield & Capous-Desyllas 2017; Chio & Fandt 2007; Cramer, McLeod, Craft & Agnelli 2018). The scholarship also illustrates how engaging students in a PAR project strengthens the students' social justice perspective (Bonycastle & Bonycastle 2015; Bromfield & Capous-Desyllas, 2017) and understanding of diversity and inclusion (Bozalek & Biersteker

2010). This type of education also sparks the critical consciousness of students about seeing social issues from multiple perspectives (Chio & Fandt 2007; Johnson 2010; Peabody 2013; Wehbi, Cowell, Perreault-Laird, El-Lahib & Straka 2017).

Bromfield and Capous-Desyllas (2017) found that engaging social work students in a photovoice project gave the students structure and a creative outlet for examining how their personal values intersect with social work values, and where tension or conflict may exist between the two. Similarly, Choi and Fandt (2007) observed that using the photovoice method to teach a class on diversity helped students to follow and contend with their perceptions on class topics, personal and professional expectations for inclusion, and how diversity relates to their individual histories. Choi and Fandt (2007) do recommend for social work educators to use PAR as a tool to teach community practice because it fosters the incorporation of multiple perspectives (e.g., community members, stakeholders, decision-makers).

Bonycastle and Bonycastle (2015) witnessed students deepen their understanding of social justice through the photovoice process. The researchers/instructors evaluated the experiences of the students through reflective assignments. The assignments revealed that the process of engaging directly with a community, through recruiting and training photovoice participants and creating the display of pictures, gave students an emotional, relational connection to homelessness. The students bore witness to the participants' personal stories about the topic, which provided students with a holistic learning experience, where thoughts, feelings, and

perceptions were part of the learning. The researchers emphasized that their students valued this approach to teaching and learning and, as a result, more research is warranted.

Johnson (2010) designed a community practice course, which involved students in implementing a photovoice project with first-time mothers. To recruit participants, the instructor partnered with an agency that provides services for maternal and child health programs. Through observing the students, Johnson found that the photovoice project helped the students to connect "the participants' voices to macro concerns by identifying complex, interlocking needs" (p. 309) and that was achieved through supporting "students in identifying and analyzing different points of view" (p. 310). Johnson (2010) asserted that both students and the community partners viewed photovoice as a powerful way to generate community-based recommendations for program and policy changes.

Previous research on using PAR as a pedagogical tool supports the conceptual argument that this approach helps students to understand the difference between generating community-based knowledge and cherry-picking data to form a "truth." This body of research illustrates how self-awareness, critical consciousness, and systems of oppression come to life for students through the implementation of a PAR project. These processes correspond with challenging the manipulation of evidence for political gain and understanding truth as context-dependent and as grounded in the standpoint of the storyteller.

With this current study, we aim to extend prior scholarship in three ways. First, we will assess if the present research reveals similar findings to previous research to provide a further verification of those results. Our second aim is to see what new findings emerge from this research that can contribute to the larger body of scholarship. Third, through an evaluation of the outcomes, we are considering the role PAR can play in educating students in a "post-truth" era.

## Course Description

For the present study, the MSW students used specific photovoice methods to elicit a critical discussion about campus sexual violence. The MSW students recruited and trained students who had met the inclusion criteria (being between the ages of 18–24) on how to compose the photos so that the images created a metaphor, or a symbol aligned with the topic. After taking the photographs, the photographer students participated in a focus group discussion facilitated by the instructor of the course. The MSW students observed the focus groups by taking field notes, documenting their perceptions of what emerged from the conversation. During the focus group, the photographer students witnessed all the pictures taken and evaluated the images through the SHOWED method (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell & Pastronk 2004). This approach consists of asking the following questions: "What do you See here? What is Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this condition Exist? What can we Do

about it?" The purpose of these questions is to encourage the community members to engage in a consciousness-raising dialogue about campus sexual violence and propose potential solutions to the problem. After the focus group exper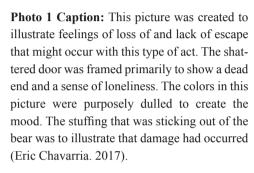ience, the instructor tasked the MSW students to organize a public event where the photographers displayed their images and discussed them with the public.

Below are four photographs produced by the photographer-students that illustrate how they perceived campus rape culture.



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*Photo 1.*

**Photo 1 Caption:** This picture was created to illustrate feelings of loss of and lack of escape that might occur with this type of act. The shattered door was framed primarily to show a dead end and a sense of loneliness. The colors in this picture were purposely dulled to create the mood. The stuffing that was sticking out of the bear was to illustrate that damage had occurred (Eric Chavarria. 2017).



©Candace Christensen
*Photo 2.*

**Photo 2 Caption:** The battery essentially gives life to the car. Any external damage to the container of the battery will eventually cause the battery to malfunction, and one's car will not drive. Imagine your body as the container of the battery; after being sexually assaulted, the body has been externally harmed, and the person's inner being has been emotionally destroyed. One could start to feel as if they are corroding, worthless, or dying inside (Linda Tijerina. 2017).

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**Photo 3.**



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**Photo 4.**

**Photo 3 Caption:** Solution: Brace the Crack. With any break, the plan is to remedy the situation. Acknowledging the problem is the first step to reduce sexual harassment. Bracing the cracks of a building changes the outer appearance but not the functionality of the building (Max Garcia 2017).

**Photo 4 Caption:** No matter how dark things get, there's a clear, blue sky on the other side of it all. Clear skies, clear roads, clear mind. We transform not by looking back, but by looking forward at the road ahead (Daniella Aguirre 2017).

## Methodology

The design of this study engages a constructivist paradigm as described by Guba and Lincoln (1994). The ontology for this paradigm assumes that reality is relative, dynamic, and shaped by individuals and groups that agree on shared values, norms, and contextual meanings. A constructivist epistemology purports that the generation of knowledge is the result of the intersection between the people, perceptions, experiences, and contexts involved in the research. Thus, knowledge is relative to the people who participated in its creation. The constructivist lens is in alignment with the purpose of participatory research because it illuminates the subjective truths of individuals and how those truths are shaped by circumstances that impact a person at all levels of interaction (micro, mezzo, macro) (Leavy 2017; Wang 1999).

## Reflexivity

Each of the three authors reflected on how their identities and lived experiences impacted how they interpreted the data and

wrote up the researcher results. The first author considered how her identities as European American, queer, feminist and as a woman shaped her paradigm and intersected with the worldview of the MSW students. The second author reflected on how her position as a doctoral student in education formed her interest in how research methodologies can be used as pedagogical tools. She applied that interest to her work on this project. The third author considered her journey as both an MSW student who participated in the study and a qualitative researcher evaluating her classmates' coursework. She wants to do her peers justice and allow their stories to speak for themselves and stay within the context of the story presented.

## Participants

For this study, we employed non-probability and purposeful sampling methods (Patton 2015). The sample for this study included 55 graduate students enrolled in a MSW program at a Hispanic Serving Institution in the southwest region of the United States. Each student enrolled for one of three class sections for Advanced Community Practice. While the instructor did not collect formal demographic information on participants, the class interactions indicated the following demographics: women n = 47, men n = 8 (none of the students identified as transgender or gender queer); African American n = 7, African n = 1, Asian n = 1, European American n = 17, and Latinx n = 29. The estimated age range of students was as follows: 22 to 29 years old n = 32, 30 to 39 years old n = 14, 40 to 49 years old n = 8, and 60 to 65 years old n = 1.

## Data Collection

The instructor collected course materials generated by the students that included students' interactions in the form of online discussion posts with peers (via Blackboard) throughout the semester, reflection papers submitted by students at the end of the semester, a collaborative, written process evaluation of the project, and researcher observations. The data artifacts included 55 reflection papers (five to eight pages each), 51 response-to-readings on photovoice and sexual assault (approx. 500 words each), and 55 field observation notes from one focus group with the photovoice participants. The university internal review board deemed this project as non-regulated research because we are using coursework artifacts as the data for this project. The first author developed pseudonyms for the MSW students.

## Data Analysis

The research team used grounded theory data analysis methods. This work involved each researcher independently reading, coding, and categorizing the data. We used line-by-line descriptive and analytic coding techniques as described by Charmaz (2014), which included open coding and focused coding. The focused codes led to the emergence of three primary categories. In between each coding stage, the authors met to discuss the codes that emerged and to agree on the focused codes and categories. Further, the first author engaged in memo writing to understand the properties of the codes and categories.

## Results

Three distinct but related categories emerged from the preliminary data analysis. These categories arose in response to our research question – "What do graduate students perceive as the role of qualitative research in conducting community practice in a post-truth era?" The three distinct but related categories are the following: (a) supporting cultural competence, (b) facilitating self-awareness, and (c) viewing truth as multifaceted.

## Supporting Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is a critical element of social work practice. It is vitally important in social work education. Thus, cultural competence is emphasized in the National Association of Social Workers' (National Association of Social Workers [NASW]) Code of Ethics. NASW (2017) addresses practice criteria in working with individuals, groups, and communities. Culturally competent practice acknowledges cultural humility and taking the role of a learner. It demands that social workers serve as change agents empowering and advocating for marginalized and oppressed groups. It concedes that understanding group needs happens through partnerships that are collaborative and acknowledge group strengths. The photovoice project of this community practice class incorporated critical elements of culturally competent practice as discussed in these findings.

A central finding from the research is how students found the implementation and evaluation of the photovoice project to support a culturally relevant approach to community practice. The students perceived photovoice as a tool that helps communities to express their truth about a given topic. And this truth is grounded in community values, perceptions, and experiences. "It was critical that we have [undergraduate] students be the representatives of this issue because we were examining the campus climate regarding sexual assault and wanted to be sure we had the proper voices present" (Tabitha, European American, woman).

Tabitha described the importance of including local perspectives through the project. She perceived sexual assault on college campuses as specific to students, so their feelings and thoughts were critical to bringing awareness to the issue. Her response illustrates photovoice as an avenue for advocacy and empowerment that allowed undergraduate participants to share their perspectives with others about a sensitive social problem that directly impacts them. Tabitha's response shows how photovoice uses essential elements of cultural competence through advocating, empowering, and providing space to understand distinct experiences, beliefs, and values of others.

MSW students expressed their understanding of how the participants were central to the project. "It was their images and their stories that made the show and started the dialogue" (Michelle, Latinx, woman). The MSW students perceived the participant images and stories as generating a critical conversation throughout the project and placing the participants at the forefront of the event, guiding the message and narrative. This method created a way for participants to advocate for themselves using their photos and stories. "Realizing this part of the experience was interesting because as social workers, we usually want to be front and center in the helping and

advocating […]. It is the people we serve that have to have a voice in social change" (Michelle, Latinx, woman).

Michelle described her expectations of the social worker in helping and advocating for others. Social workers help others solve issues by being the facilitators of the change process. Michelle acknowledged her awareness of the role community members play as well. This quote demonstrates her understanding of another social worker role – as not only a change agent but as one who empowers others to become change agents. These essential aspects of a culturally relevant approach to community practice foster community buy-in and input that is crucial to bringing awareness to community needs and bringing resolution.

Cultural competence emphasizes cultural humility, understanding experiences, inclusivity, and non-judgmental avenues that promote freedom to express thoughts and opinions. The following quotations demonstrate how MSW students perceived the focus group as a forum that facilitated a safe space for participants to express their truths and views about sexual assault and rape culture.

> […] the way in which the focus group was facilitated made for a comfortable atmosphere. I believe the probes that were given helped the participants feel at ease and made them more willing to speak their opinion (Myra, European American, woman).

> What was equally surprising was how verbal they were with expressing their opinions to one another and the support you saw between complete strangers (Jacqueline, European American, woman).

> All the participants of the focus group were very open and honest about their views.

They were all respectful of others' opinions and shared the floor openly (Chandra, African American, woman).

Students observed participants as they openly expressed their thoughts, shared ideas, and developed mutual respect. Sharing diverse opinions allowed everyone present to listen and learn from one another and resulted in a supportive, shared space. These quotations show how the focus group contributed to building a community centered on an important and sensitive topic. This culturally relevant approach to understanding community needs is a collaborative process where partnerships are equal.

A significant finding was how students internalized cultural competence in community practice using photovoice. Students described an awareness of cultural competence during the project: "I believe this project did incorporate many of the concepts associated with cultural competence, and the idea that cultural competence is a part of continuous learning and a developing concept" (Josie, Latinx, woman). Josie perceived cultural competency as fluid and understands it is an ability that social workers continue to cultivate. This statement reflects an essential aspect of social work, as social workers are expected to be lifelong learners and should continue to learn about diverse groups. Having this awareness shapes the social worker identity.

Students described culturally competent practice using photovoice through the work they were doing with the target population and stakeholders. Social workers must continually seek knowledge about the individuals, groups, and communities they serve to be able to understand expe-

riences, interact effectively, and implement appropriate interventions. Crystal reflected on the importance of PAR based research in understanding experiences and needs and empowering communities to find resolutions, "When it comes to researching with a certain population it's important to really understand how the community perceives the issues at hand and really listen to how they feel the issue can be resolved" (Crystal, European American, woman). Crystal described how research serves as a way to build knowledge about a specific community and how the community's voice is critical to developing this knowledge and finding resolutions. Gathering data that represents a community's true experiences, needs, and perspectives fulfills the social work commitment to incorporating respect and sensitivity in work with diverse groups while recognizing strengths. Her statement illustrates the importance of using a research method that promotes participants as the researchers and others as learners, and where community voices and perspectives empower community action. Implicit in Crystal's statement is her recognition of the ethical responsibility of the social worker in gathering knowledge to engage in culturally competent practice.

Students engaged in a culturally relevant approach to community practice using PAR based research in photovoice. Students internalized a culturally competent identity as future social workers throughout the process, from implementation to evaluation. The photovoice project allowed students to understand better ways to serve and empower communities to find resolutions to social issues.

## Facilitating Self-Awareness

According to the Council on Social Work Education (2015), core social work practice behaviors must include "reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism" (p. 7) and "apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies" (p. 7). Fostering the self-awareness of social work students is a primary goal for social work education. A prominent finding that emerged is how using qualitative research methods facilitates learning about oneself both as a person and as a social worker.

Many students described how their participation in the facilitation of the photovoice project led to increased self-awareness regarding professional and personal aspects. While the experiences of students varied throughout the process, they were able to recognize what they gained personally and professionally from the project as well as making the connection between gained insights and their practice as social workers. "As a result of my participation in this project, I initially thought this type of work was not for me, but I learned how influential it can be, and I learned I need to dig deeper in myself and challenge myself" (Daniela, Latinx, woman).

Daniela gained a better understanding of how self-reflection can impact her practices as a social worker. This process allowed her to view herself as the starting point in bringing about change to a community. This outcome is evidence of the interplay of personal and professional growth, which allowed students to enhance their ability to be more confident

and authentic in their approach to community practice as social workers. Laura's statement speaks to this process, "although I started the project with apprehension, I felt empowered and emboldened by the project's end" (Laura, Latinx, woman).

In conducting the photovoice project within the community, students had a chance to engage in a learning-by-doing process. This process allowed them to understand the nature and the value of their profession, as indicated by Carla's (Latinx, woman) statement, "I learned to appreciate the work that community organizers do even more and started to understand how movements are created and maintained."

Students' awareness of the self allowed them to think critically about their approach to social work practice. As the photovoice project operated at multiple levels, MSW students had the opportunity to experience different positions they could take in social work settings.

> I believe my personal goals and directions I want to pursue in social work is right for me. The completion of this event has reinforced the idea that while I want to pursue macro or policy-oriented positions, I would be doing myself harm to omit micro-oriented experiences (Harold, European American, man).

Harold's experience led him to consider his approach to social work. As the project continued, he had the chance to understand better the micro-oriented aspects of social work and decided not to dismiss this focus in his practice.

Working in a team setting, with the community, resulted in MSW students making new discoveries about themselves. This structure also provided an opportunity to apply these new traits in their performance as social workers. The following quotation is an illustration of how self-awareness can be influential professionally.

> I gained many experiences during this project that I feel will allow me to continue to work on community activism using photography, which is my creative medium. I learned that I love this type of work. I want to marry my role as a social worker and that of a creative to further social justice (Michelle, Latinx, woman).

MSW students not only had the opportunity to see and understand what community work entails, but also saw the benefit of using the photovoice method to engage with community members. They recognized the value of using creative mediums to connect with people, which enriched the process. "The photovoice experience enhanced my conscious awareness of social issues in the community and the importance of my role as a social worker" (Rachel, African American, woman).

Given the nature of the photovoice project being concluded with an exhibit, it was inevitable that the students needed to complete the work at several levels. Thus, students worked in teams to accomplish different tasks regarding implementing the project. The experience of working in a team setting allowed them to see their potential regarding their roles in groups. One significant aspect of self-awareness that emerged from the data was related to the understanding team dynamics. This understanding is vital, as social work practice involves working with diverse people in a group setting. "I learned more about myself and how to improve in my work with others" (Andrea, Latinx, woman). While some students, such as Andrea, expressed what they learned throughout the project,

some students took this learning one step further and connected it to their future practice within social work or academia. Another MSW student realized that establishing new partnerships in social work is a strength, although she had discomfort in doing so in the beginning. As she went through the process and moved past the unease, she gained an understanding of how this practice is an essential aspect of social work.

The photovoice project allowed MSW students to see the potential of using visual methods, particularly photovoice, for understanding social issues. Additionally, they were able to reflect on themselves, which then was reflected on their social worker identities by actively engaging in the process. Understanding one's self better gives an opportunity to enhance confidence in one's professional self.

## Viewing Truth as Multifaceted

Viewing truth as multifaceted refers to the ability to understand and apply a constructivist paradigm to community practice. A constructivist model asserts that multiple truths exist, rather than one objective truth. The photovoice method facilitates the generation and discussion of the subjective truths about how a community perceives and experiences a specific phenomenon. This approach counters a top-down approach, where a group of "experts," who exist outside of a community, define what is true for the community. Rather, photovoice views truth as subjective, dependent on the context in which a problem emerges and how that context interacts with the identities and positionalities of the community members. This final category

illustrates how students perceived this qualitative, photo-based approach as a format that allowed for multifaceted truths to emerge among the photovoice participants and for the MSW students. The MSW students noticed how using photovoice as a method for organizing a community encouraged community members to generate their interpretations and perspectives on campus sexual violence.

> What I also liked about utilizing photovoice was how comfortable the abstract images made talking about a taboo subject, such as sexual assault. Because the photographs were not a directly worded opinion, but rather a symbolic picture, it felt more comfortable to talk about the subject of the event. The pictures were a great conversation starter, as there was a wide array of questions that could be asked by looking at the images (Tabitha, European American, woman).

Tabitha described how using photovoice as a pathway to organizing a community around a specific problem like sexual violence dismantles the fear, discomfort, and partisanship that can come with discussing taboo subjects. The photographs encouraged viewers to talk about sexual violence and to ask multiple questions about how the photographer constructed the image. These questions could include tapping into the personal, emotional, and subjective ways in which the photographer connects with this issue. Bearing witness to this private, intuitive connection creates a pathway for the viewer to understand the topic from a unique and new perspective. Encountering this new perspective from an emotional, symbolic standpoint breaks down the taboos and intractable political stances that come with controversial top-

ics, especially in a post-truth era. Tabitha's response shows how using a qualitative, PAR approach to community practice dismantles the assumptions, stereotypes, and guardedness individuals may have about a difficult subject like sexual violence. The reason that photovoice dismantles those barriers is through photographers taking ownership of and articulating their perspective and experiences through personal imagery and symbols.

In this quotation, Kelly expressed how the focus group experience deepened her awareness of how the photovoice process encourages a safe space for participants to share difficult emotions related to the topic:

> The night we had the focus group proved to be a powerful experience. One of the participants shared how the experiences of taking pictures brought up previous feelings, and she shared in a vulnerable way [...]. I'm not sure if she allowed herself to be vulnerable because she felt safe in the confines of the focus group, or the feelings she was feeling led her to a vulnerable place and we happened to be in that space with her. Either way, it was a powerful moment and it validated that coming together as a class and bringing awareness to something impactful was going to hopefully help other people (Kelly, European American, woman).

Kelly perceived the focus group experience, where the photographers shared their photographs as a potent way to share authentic and intimate points of view. Kelly described how one photographer articulated how the process of composing and taking the photos generated intense thoughts and emotions. The photographer was open with her feelings, which conveyed vulnerability and encouraged the other photographers and the MSW students to care about her perceptions and experiences. Kelly stated, "we happened to be in that space with her," which means that the MSW students were moved to empathize and support the photographer's meaningful experience. Implicit in Kelly's quotation is that the focus group discussion created a safe space to share difficult truths, troubling experiences, and be open about vulnerabilities. The process of sharing and discussing the photographs encouraged the photographers to share their individual truths and support each other in the sharing and meaning-making.

The following quotations illustrate how MSW students observed how photovoice encourages the participants and the larger community to view the problem in a nuanced, multifaceted manner. "Although the photographs had the participant's description that accompanied it, the photos also allowed the viewer to form his/her interpretation, and it created a broader dialogue within the community" (Emerald, African American, woman). Emerald's quotation illustrates how she observed the photovoice method to encourage the larger community to develop deeper individual understandings of sexual violence. These individual understandings encouraged discussions about the problem that are nuanced and multifaceted. This next quotation portrays how Paulina integrated a perception of photovoice method as a way to encourage the community to define their truth on a given topic:

> We did not impose our "expertise" onto community members; instead, we allowed them to define the problem and how they thought the problem could be resolved. That is what I appreciated most about photovoice, is that you give community mem-

bers a voice, you empower them to make a difference (Paulina, Latinx, woman).

Paulina articulated how she understood the strength of photovoice method to be how it dismantles the expert/subject binary. Paulina noted how photovoice privileges the perspective of the participant in generating knowledge about a community and a given topic. Also, Paulina made the connection between allowing the community to develop their truth about a problem to supporting the community in developing a feasible solution. Below, Lauren's quotation demonstrates how she viewed the focus group discussion about the photographs to encourage the expression of multiple points of view:

> The focus group was very meaningful […]. It was quite interesting to hear the responses of the participants, as they provided what they saw in the images as well as their reasoning for taking each image […]. I was made aware that each image could mean something very different for someone else's perspective (Lauren, African American, woman).

Lauren spoke to gaining a new awareness for how photovoice facilitates the photographers toward expressing personal, unique understandings about a topic. Also, the method helped Lauren to consider how more people can derive multiple interpretations from one image. The ability to appreciate that people can have different perspectives on an issue connects with the goals of using community practice to support multi-dimensional, community-based understandings of a given problem.

This category emerged from witnessing how the MSW students perceived the photovoice project to facilitate a broad and multi-layered understanding of campus

sexual violence. The quotations illustrate how the MSW students view photovoice as making a controversial subject more comfortable to discuss, encouraging the photographers to share personal, emotional points of view, promoting multiple interpretations of the images, supporting the voice of community members, and emphasizing that there is no wrong answer. These findings illustrate how the photovoice method engaged these MSW students in developing a critical consciousness that can dismantle the harmful attributes of post-truth politics. Rather than imposing a truth on to a community or cherry-picking data to serve a political agenda, photovoice privileges the perspectives of the community members and honors diverse viewpoints on a given topic. These quotations from the MSW students show how implementing a photovoice project gave them skills they can use to support communities with speaking their truth from multiple perspectives.

## Conclusion

The results of this study illuminate how using PAR, specifically the photovoice method, as a pedagogical tool impacted student-learning experiences. The findings both support and extend previous research on using PAR in social work education. In alignment with several studies, the current results illustrate how implementing and evaluating a PAR project strengthened the students' understandings of diversity, social justice, and inclusion. The findings for this category demonstrate how photovoice is a tool that allows communities to convey their values, perceptions, and experiences on a given topic. This portrayal becomes a

truth that is dynamic and community-centered. To extend previous research, we found that our results applied explicitly to how the photovoice method supported students in understanding and implementing a cultural competence perspective in community practice. The participants become the researchers, which eliminates the researcher/participant hierarchy. With PAR, social workers teach the community members how to capture, analyze, and disseminate knowledge that represents a community-generated body of knowledge. The focus group process engages the photographers in interpreting their photographs, which is a structured mechanism for articulating the community's point of view in a visual, symbolic manner that extends beyond traditional methods for sharing research results. The end of semester event, where the photographers share their images with the public, broadens the focus group discussion to a community dialogue on how the pictures represent the community issue. Having critical conversations about the images helps the community to develop a distinct truth about the topic. The photographs are an accessible way of sharing that truth. Further, the results depict how PAR corresponds with supporting communities with developing their version of the "truth" in an era where the truth is manipulated to serve groups with the most sociopolitical power.

Previous research also demonstrates how using PAR in social work courses cultivates self-awareness among students. This study also revealed how using PAR for community practice encourages student reflection on both personal and professional issues. Students learned about the intersection between their personal values and skills and professional values and practice behaviors. Students reflected on how the tension between their personal skill set and the course expectations challenged them to achieve outcomes they had not previously considered possible. Beyond outcomes, students learned to recognize identities and roles within social work that had not occurred to them before the course. Several students discovered that they have an interest in leadership and the critical role leadership plays in community practice.

In relationship to education in a post-truth era, the PAR experience helps students to see "truth" as multifaceted. Focusing a PAR project on campus sexual violence helped the students engage with the discomfort that comes with making room for diverse points of view on a sensitive topic. Using carefully composed photographs imbued with multiple meanings created a process whereby the students could observe how the community members made sense of campus sexual violence. The students learned that the community contains a multitude of perceptions and experiences on this topic and that PAR creates a safe, culturally relevant, and respectful structure for presenting the community's multiple truths. Students mentioned that the focus group discussion notably fostered the community's articulation of various ways of understanding sexual violence. Also, the end of semester event acted as an open invitation to the public, where the student photographers and the MSW students could reveal, discuss, and celebrate the diverse points of view illustrated by the photographs and narratives.

These results depict how using PAR as a pedagogical tool carries an essential role in a post-truth era. Specifically, students learned how the photovoice method engages communities in generating their knowledge and "truth" about various topics. Students were able to see how the ability to cultivate community-based data empowers the community to take ownership of the problems they identify. This ownership counters oppressive, outsider narratives that decision-makers in positions of power have generated about marginalized populations.

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**VEIKLOS TYRIMO DALYVAUJANT METODO TAIKYMAS MOKANT BENDRUOMENĖS PRAKTIKOS *POST-VERITAS* EPOCHOJE**

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S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje analizuojamos socialinio darbo magistrantūros programos studentų mokymosi patirtys Bendruomenės praktikų pažengusiems kurso metu. Pagrindinis kurso metu taikytas mokymo metodas – veiklos tyrimo dalyvaujant (*angl*. participatory action research) atmaina fotobalsas. Studentai atliko numatytas fotobalso užduotis apie seksualinį smurtą studentų miesteliuose, kurių dalyviai buvo kiti studentai. Kaip kurso užduotis studentai rašė refleksijas, atsakymus į skaitytus tekstus ir pastabas apie atrinktųjų grupių interviu, visi šie artefaktai sudarė šio projekto duomenis. Duomenys analizuoti taikant grindžiamosios teorijos metodus ir *post-veritas* politikos (*angl*. post-truth politics) prieigą. Iš viso buvo išskirtos trys kategorijos: a) kultūrinės kompetencijos palaikymas, b) savimonės skatinimas ir c) tiesos daugialypiškumo suvokimas.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** fotobalsas, veiklos tyrimas dalyvaujant, bendruomenės praktika, socialinio darbo mokslas.