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# Toward a Co-Working Posture in Global Mental Health: A Literature Review on the Use of PhotoVoice in Partnership with Forcibly Displaced Populations

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## Recommended Citation

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Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 2, 2022

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Expressive Arts Therapy

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**Abstract**

As of 2020, the number of forcibly displaced people in the world numbered 82.4 million. This radically diverse population, approximately one in every 95 people, only continues to burgeon as wars and conflicts send millions fleeing for their lives. Sadly, on top of the massive allostatic load endured by the forcibly displaced, many are then doubly harmed by global mental health professionals who lack insight into the culture and worldview of the fellow humans they serve. In an effort to support meaningful therapeutic work in the cross-cultural milieu, this paper presents a literature review inquiry into the purpose and process of centering the ontological frameworks of the forcibly displaced in global mental healthcare practice. The paper goes on to explore the theoretical foundations of Paulo Freire and Liberation Psychology as well as their influence on the expressive arts, community-based research model PhotoVoice. Several PhotoVoice studies are then reviewed within the frame of how they address the four categories of refugee stress as defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.). In the interest of encouraging respectful partnerships in communities where photography is ill-advised, the paper briefly presents a separate model of a respectful, arts-based mental health partnership not centered on photography. Based on the research presented, recommendations are made as to how global mental health practitioners can partner with forcibly displaced communities in ways that center the voice and worldview of the community in question.

*Keywords:* Forcibly displaced people, stress, Paulo Freire, community-based research, PhotoVoice

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*"Our conversations with Karim [a Syrian refugee] ended with a piece of advice. "It is really important that you write about this in your paper," he told us. "People always think that the refugees have problems and need psychologists. You need to write about the fact that refugee kids can also be the psychologists! They know how to solve what makes us depressed. I believe they know the solution.""*

*- Brykalski & Reyes*

Traumatic experiences, such as the current transgressions against the Ukrainian people, violate the voice and agency of effected communities. I posit, then, that any therapeutic work with such communities must assume a posture that sensitively and purposefully reverses these disempowering dynamics. Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) desiring to facilitate a healing process in the global setting may find their ontologically foreign methods lacking in effectiveness or languishing in constant planning phases. Ignorance of local worldview, inherent lack of trust on part of forcibly displaced communities, and steep power differentials, among other factors, often confound the seemingly simple desire to "help." If one is convinced of the importance of a trauma-informed posture (SAHMSA, 2014), the question of how to engage with communities in ways that invite their own cultural identity, frameworks, and solutions to the fore while purposefully decreasing inherent power differentials becomes one of marked importance.

By means of a literature review, I address this concern by discussing possibilities for community-centered therapeutic engagement with forcibly displacement people. In the

following pages I define the term *forcibly displaced community* (FDP)and highlight the benefits of centering community wisdom and resources in the healing process. The reader will note that I often refer to the FDP community in question as "local colleagues" throughout this paper.

The paper goes on to present both Liberation Psychology and the posture of Paulo Freire as grounding theory upon which a respectful practice of community mental health work can be built. Case studies exploring the use of PhotoVoice, an expressive arts modality centered on community-based, participatory research, are then explored as examples for therapeutically addressing various categories of refugee stress through creativity-based community reflexivity. Non-photocentric methods of community-centered therapeutic partnership are also identified, as there are contexts where such an approach is necessary. Finally, I discuss various principles extracted from the aforementioned studies in hopes of encouraging a respectful, co-working posture between global mental healthcare workers and forcibly displaced communities.

## Literature Review

### Who Are the Forcibly Displaced?

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR, 2020) defines forcibly displaced peoples (FDPs) as refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced peoples (IDPs). According to the commission's 2020 Global Trends Report, approximately 82.4 million people fall under this designation. This translates into approximately 1% of the world's population being forcibly displaced, or one in 95 people, a dramatic escalation from one in 159 people in 2010.  The High Commission reports that the majority of forcibly displaced people hail from Middle Eastern countries and West/Central Africa.  Myanmar and

Venezuela stand as the lone representatives of Asia and South America. Undoubtedly, an updated report would highlight the spike in Ukrainian citizens fleeing for their lives.

The amount of cultural and linguistic diversity of this population, coupled with the traumatic impact of adverse events occurring pre-, during, and post-displacement, calls for sober consideration of how global mental health practitioners can assume a co-working posture with these communities. This thesis defines a "co-working posture" as a humble, reflexive approach on part of NGO staff who consider community wisdom and partnership as central to global mental health work.

### *Enlanguaging the Experiences of the Forcibly Displaced*

For many mental health practitioners, including those from inside and outside forcibly displaced communities (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018; Namer & Razum, 2017), the scale of suffering amongst this diverse population exceeds North American diagnostic categories of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, and depression (APA, 2013). Swedish mental health practitioners grappled to understand the biopsychosocial manifestations of the FDP experience by creating a new diagnostic term, "Resignation Syndrome" (Namer & Razum, 2017). It was defined as a form of culture-bound) catatonia solely diagnosed in those fleeing crises in the Middle East (Sallin et al., 2016). Cultural Psychiatrist Joseba Achotegu coined the term "Ulysses Syndrome" (Namer & Razum, 2017, p. 1) to describe the combined psychosomatic impact of forced displacement, war conditions, and oppression on Latin American refugees in Spain.

Others encourage abandoning foreign categories of mental illness altogether in favor of centering the ontology of displaced people in defining their own lived experience (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018; Jacquez et al., 2021; Tippens et al., 2021; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wessells, 2021). Brykalski and Rayes (2018), researchers who explored the "lack of culturally sensitive and locally grounded mental health research" (p. 34), discuss the work of

neuropsychologist Dr. M. K. Hamza of the Syrian American Medical Society. Dr. Hamza, a member of the Syrian diaspora, understood the impact of his people's chronic traumatic stress to exceed the conceptual parameters of the DSM-5's (APA, 2013) PTSD diagnostic criteria (Ahmed et al., 2018).  In 2018, Dr. Hamza began promoting use of the term "Human Devastation Syndrome" (Brykalksi & Reyes, 2018, p. 30) as a diagnostic category for the psychological impact of his community's lived experience.

Of specific interest to this literature review is that the phrase "human devastation" (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018, p. 24) is applied by a practitioner of Syrian background, a community insider. As such, Dr. Hamza knew his term carried greater intra-cultural functionality than a DSM (APA, 2013) diagnosis because "human devastation" as a concept is embedded in Syrian social thought as an accepted descriptive category for collective human suffering (Ahmed et al., 2018).  For Syrian people, whose culture is defined by honor-shame dynamics and collectivist thought, the most appropriate way to acknowledge one's mental health struggles is to "frame them as collective and shared" (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018, p. 37). North American approaches to healing, which typically locate and treat pathology within the context of the individual, lose their presumed relevance in light of local cultural dynamics.

Research participants Karim and Kadijah (pseudonyms), point to a sense of "unilateral helping" (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018, p. 32) experienced by participants in NGO humanitarian programming in Syria. Having been alienated from their homes by oppression and violence, Karim asserts that, "[NGOs] turn us into the aliens of the century" (p. 32) by employing healing modalities born of foreign ontologies and subsequently "[going] crazy" (p. 33) when local participants do not resonate with the organizations' vision or methods. Kadijah adds that such programs serve to deepen one's sense of "ajiz" (p. 33), or a personal sense of being unable to better oneself. Karim and Khadija, along with Brykalski and Rayes

(2018) and Namer and Razum (2017), call for the inclusion of local cultural perspective and voice into conversations regarding mental health policy, terminology, and treatment.

## Theoretical Perspectives and Application

How can practitioners working in the international milieu partner with communities in ways that center FDP dignity and worldview? Brykalski and Rayes' 2018 article, "It's a Power, Not a Disease: Syrian Youth Respond to Human Devastation Syndrome inspired a review of similarly focused literature revealing two predominant theoretical orientations as animating forces in this field, Liberation Psychology and the participatory approach of Paulo Freire (Wang & Burris, 1997; Valenzano, 2021). While an in-depth exploration of both perspectives is beyond the scope of this thesis, the basic principles of each provide valuable underpinning for international humanitarian partnership with forcibly displaced people.

In their paper on creating public psychology with refugee communities, Jacquez et al. (2021) highlight the increased psychosocial wellbeing potentiated by "utilizing community engaged and action-oriented methodologies" (p. 1281). Initially conceptualized by Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Central American Jesuit priest and social psychologist influenced by the work of Paolo Freire, liberation psychology situates the suffering of individuals within the broader context of their social realities. It focuses on transforming systems of oppression and marginalization, thereby improving *both* the "intrapsychic and sociopolitical" (p. 1282) conditions of the populations in question. Liberation Psychology emphasizes the purposeful sharing of power between outside practitioners and insiders of oppressed communities toward the goal of increased social justice.

If Liberation Psychology partly encompasses the "why" of global mental health work with forcibly displaced people, the Freirean participatory method of problem posing education constitutes the "how" (Jacquez et al., 2021, p. 1289). Global mental health practitioners can learn from his model of "education for liberation" (Citelli et al., 2021, p. 2)

that saw facilitators and students alike as co-learners in the growth process.  Jarldorn, in her 2021 *PhotoVoice Handbook for Social Workers,* underscores Freire's unique position on development work. Freire believed the most important knowledge relevant to social change rests within the population in question. As an expressive arts therapist committed to Rogerian principles of reflexivity-driven problem solving (Saurman, 2021), I strongly identify with this aspect of the Freirean posture.

Freire's underlying assumption informed other elements of his unique posture as he partnered with oppressed communities in cultivating their own liberation. For example, Freire challenged educators and development workers to embrace a facilitative rather than authoritative role wherein the lived experience of the oppressed served as the guiding force in creating the community's desired future (Jarldorn, 2021).  In doing so, he purposefully initiated relationships with his students characterized by mutual respect and refused to pathologize people for exhibiting the negative effects of sociopolitical oppression, such as fatigue, lack of mental clarity, or depressive demeanor.

Freire understood that the oppressed and displaced were not "disordered," as the North American mental health establishment may assume, but rather were manifesting the dehumanizing impact of oppressive sociopolitical systems. His ideas gave birth to participatory methods (Citelli et al., 2021), which Jacquez et al. (2021) define as "[encompassing] any systematic inquiry that collaborates with stakeholders or community members to gain knowledge to inform action or change" (pg. 1283).  The authors emphasize the role of participatory approaches in identifying best practices based on the expressed needs of partner communities, especially those in cross-cultural situations.

Tippens et al. (2021), who studied cultural bereavement and resilience amongst Yazidi women resettled in the United States, provide a useful example of participatory methods in support of FDP mental health. This team of authors pointed out that outsider

clinical language, such as the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) or the ICD-10 (WHO, 1993), "may not account for culturally meaningful patterns of grief, help-seeking, or communicating distress" (p. 1487). This also applies to a disconnect with cultural understandings of etiology, concepts of healing and creative problem solving in the sphere of mental health. Each of these factors is tied to cultural identity and maintenance of well-being, making them especially relevant to the lives of FDPs. Tippens et al. (2021) ground their work in Eisenbach's (1991) non-clinical, non-pathologizing term, "cultural bereavement" (p. 674) to describe the forcibly displaced experience of losing shared culture, identity, and sense of place. The authors argue that employing ontologically foreign mental health practices with this population further removes FDPs from their own culturally embedded processes of resilience. When this occurs, the forcibly displaced are then doubly harmed by those who wish them ill and those who wish them well, as Mr. Karim's aforementioned "aliens of the century," (Brykalksi & Rayes, 2018, p. 32) describes.

To combat this, global mental health practitioners are encouraged to honor the concept of "cultural relativity" (Tippens et al., p. 8) which describes how the processes contributing to resilience are "culturally, temporally, and historically embedded" (p. 1488). To honor and encourage the use of these processes in out-of-context settings, the authors suggest a phenomenologically-based approach that takes into account community agency and established patterns of daily living.

Wessells (2021), in his paper titled "Promoting Voice and Agency Among Forcibly Displaced Children and Adolescents refers to global mental health approaches that privilege individual-centered concepts of problems and solutions as "top down approaches" (p. 139). Such approaches, as previously discussed, focus heavily on North American labels, such as PTSD (APA, 2013), which decontextualize FDP community pain onto the singularity of individual experience. These top-down approaches born of cultures that emphasize individual

responsibility also tend to both medicalize and pathologize issues actually rooted in "social, historic, political and economic" (p. 141) systems. This is markedly problematic for the majority of FDPs who hail from collectivist cultures, communities where group responsibility and membership are valued above all. Wessells (2021) writings highlight the necessity of "bottom-up" approaches that call to the fore voices of displaced minors.

Wessells (2021) describes "top-down, expert-driven approaches" (p.141) as limiting local populations in three ways, the first being that of impeding cultural identity. Ontologically foreign global mental health actions are often ignorant regarding local cultural constructs of children's development and well-being, as well as the role of community-rooted protective factors in their lives. This ignorance also applies to local spiritual beliefs and idioms of distress, both vital concepts for the practice of mental health. The author sites the *Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings* (IASC, 2008), which compels outside global mental health staff to partner with "local healers and cultural beliefs and practices" (p. 142). Wessells (2021) cautions practitioners to be mindful of power-imbalances that may coerce forcibly displaced communities to abandon culturally appropriate methods of coping in order to receive support from outside sources. The development of an integrated cultural identity in the context of the community's new environment must be supported in order to nurture a fractured sense of well-being.

Wessells' (2021) second and third statements regarding the limits of top-down approaches highlight the squelching of both local voice and local agency. Echoing Tippens et al. (2021), he notes that in cutting off understanding of cultural identity, ontologically foreign mental health approaches limit the ability of forcibly displaced minors to both speak about and engage in their culturally embedded healing processes. Wessells points out that locally led actions, utilizing locally meaningful forms of communication on community selected

issues facilitates community agency and effective partnership in humanitarian efforts. These community sanctioned pathways for collective and self-healing may effectively dispel a felt sense of helplessness and be a protective factor against despair. The author's emphasis on culturally embedded healing processes shifts focus from a deficit-based orientation to a resource-based one, a posture many mental health providers value regardless of their specific orientations.

**Stress Is Inherent to the FDP Experience**

The flexibility of PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) allows practitioners and their partners to therapeutically engage with the varied experiences of forcibly displaced communities. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, n.d.), refugee stress can be broken down into four categories. The first, "traumatic stress," includes the threat or experience of war and persecution. The impacts of "poverty, flight and migration and community violence" (NCTSN, n.d.) also fall under this category. The NCTSN (n.d) lists resettlement stress, including struggles with "finances, housing, employment, transportation and lack of community support," as the second category of stress. Acculturation stress, which includes navigating contrasting new and old-world cultural views, problems "fitting in," and a lack of a newly integrated identity is listed as number three. Fourth and finally, the NCTSN (n.d.) names isolation stress, or experiences of discrimination, racial profiling, and harassment, as a significant category of stress for forcibly displaced people. This category also covers the impacts of losing of one's social connectedness, social status and, often, level of employment in one's home country (NCTSN, n.d.).

***PhotoVoice as Respectful Praxis***

Many well-intentioned global mental health practitioners wish to partner humbly with minoritized communities but do not know how to engage in learning about the creative resources of their local colleagues. Wessells (2021) makes a point to highlight visual-

narrative methods as a particularly useful tool for global mental health practitioners in such situations. In the following pages I highlight various PhotoVoice studies that both exemplify the value of a liberatory, Freirean approach to serving this population and lend themselves to addressing one of each of the aforementioned categories of refugee stress.

***PhotoVoice as Participatory Needs Assessment for Addressing Resettlement Stress***

A number of authors quoted in this thesis recommend privileging local concepts of distress and healing over ontologically foreign frameworks of diagnosis in cross-cultural mental health work (Brykalksi & Rayes, 2018; Jacquez et al., 2021; Tippens et al., 2021; Wessells, 2021). Some practitioners may question how to gain an understanding of where to begin. Wang and Burris stepped into this gap by publishing their 1997 article entitled "PhotoVoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment." The article describes how to partner with communities in defining their own phenomenological reality, including needs and the community resources available to meet them. As such, this method of applying PhotoVoice may be particularly useful in addressing the various aspects of FDP resettlement stress.

Wang and Burris (1997) define PhotoVoice as a knowledge-generating practice that facilitates community-based reflection on local needs and resources through the capturing of images by community insiders, promotes critical reflexivity through community-based discussion of photographs, and produces community-generated tools for broader social advocacy of disenfranchised groups (p. 369). The authors ground their creation of PhotoVoice in Freire's method of problem-posing education, a method that invites communities to collectively identify issues at the center of their lives and decide on pathways forward through shared dialogue (1997). Freire celebrated visual images as a helpful medium for inviting communities to engage in critical dialogue "about the everyday social and political forces that influence their lives" (p. 370). PhotoVoice carries the spirit of Freire

forward by emphasizing the relegation of meaning-making power to the wisdom of local colleagues.

According to Wang and Burris (1997), utilizing PhotoVoice as a community-based needs assessment has many advantages and a few marked disadvantages. The modality utilizes the powerful media of imagery and honors the creativity of local partners as "a vital source of expertise" (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018, pg. 372). This modality, as Wessells (2021) instructs, purposefully centers the perspective of minoritized populations which allows information to be sampled in contexts where the presence of traditional researchers may be disallowed. The use of cameras promotes sustained participation while in-group reflection on the themes of produced images helps to refine project goals. PhotoVoice invites the knowledge of both the photographer and the photographed, which may serve to both deepen community ties and outsider understanding of community processes. Finally, Wang and Burris (1997) highlight the modality's potential to capture a community's strengths and weaknesses in service of community-driven social advocacy.

Every intervention has its points of concern, which the authors encourage practitioners to make explicit. They define political action as the "competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 374), meaning that minoritized communities engaging in liberatory practices are by nature engaging political acts. Freire, upon who's work PhotoVoice is built, was aware of this challenge when he coined the phrase "practice of freedom" (Shaull as cited in Freire, 2005, p. 34) or "the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (p. 34). This transformative process must be tenderly co-navigated in order to facilitate PhotoVoice interventions that "do no harm" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 474). When the political act of photography is ill-advised in a

given context, this paper recommends the use of non-photocentric participatory research methods which are introduced in later pages.

Wang and Burris (1997) invited practitioners to practice a curious mind toward the subjective nature of what information is and is not gathered through PhotoVoice. The authors acknowledge that the modality "hides as well as discloses" (p. 374) data depending on whose perspective is crafting the project. They emphasize the importance of local voice being welcomed beyond the capturing of photographs and into issues of project financial management and editorial control. Humanitarian staff may find themselves tempted to share power only at specific levels of intervention, rather than all. Other issues to be aware of include the complexity of data gathered through photographs and issues with bringing together necessary stakeholders (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Wang and Burris (1997) created PhotoVoice as a community-based research tool, believing that the women of Yunnan province were the most appropriate people to outline and address the needs of women in their region. The needs assessment included both cultural insiders and outsiders as facilitators of the "Freirean process of discussion and action" (p. 376). These facilitators, as recommended by Wessells (2021), entered the process not as experts but as learners convinced of the power of culturally-led community solutions. Community participation was exemplified by involving the women of Yunnan in every step of developing the community needs assessment, which, according to Wessells (2021), honors their culturally embedded resources for resilience. This included partnering with local colleagues to provide initial training in the use of cameras and culturally informed discussion of the ethics around photography in the community. How community members envisioned their created images being used to address their identified goals was also discussed (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Wang and Burris (1997) note that employing PhotoVoice as a participatory needs assessment requires a prompt that is expansive in nature, rather than limiting, and is free of pathologizing language. For example, in the study at Yunnan province, local colleagues were invited to "photograph the spirit of village women's everyday lives" (p. 378). All images captured were then probed in facilitated group discussions to learn how image contents contributed to the overall goal of improvement in the lives of Yunnan women. Afterward, participants titled and captioned their images in light of their contribution to the developing community goals. Wang, in a separate PhotoVoice study published in 1999, introduced the "SHOWeD" method whereby group members can critically examine their own photographs. The acronym stands for,

"What do you **S**ee here?

What is really **H**appening here?

How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

Why does this situation, concern or strength **E**xist?

What can we **D**o about it?" (Wang, 1999, p. 188)

In the 1997 Yunnan study, Wang and Burris emphasize the importance of participatory analysis with community generated data. They recommend the following three-step process:

1. Group members select photos that most clearly highlight community growth areas and strengths.

2. Group members contextualize the images by sharing the narrative behind the image.

3.  Group members codify the issues, themes, or theories the community sees as salient to their goal of community improvement. (p. 380)

In the Yunnan case study, each of these steps was led by local facilitators and participants in accordance with "the acronym *VOICE:* Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience" (p. 381).

In partnership with the women of Yunnan, Wang and Burris (1997) witnessed many images of women collecting potable water. As a result, community leaders initiated the construction of clean water resources in represented communities. Though the results of this PhotoVoice project revealed similar issues to concurrently run traditional community surveys, it also resulted in deeper community connections, validation of community assets *and* issues, increased everyday people's access to power, and furnished community-generated evidence in support of community change (p. 382).

As founders of PhotoVoice, Wang and Burris (1997) set a prime example of how to hold space for community voice and choice at each level of a community-based research program's procedure. I do want to acknowledge that of all the studies included in this literature review, this study offers the clearest instruction as to how even large-scale implementations of PhotoVoice can make space for community involvement at each level of the protocol. It was surprising to notice that smaller, explicitly therapeutic adaptations of PhotoVoice, such as the ones listed below, often did not include community voice in data analysis.

## PhotoVoice's Inherent Therapeutic Benefits

Wang and Burris (1997) provide an excellent example of how PhotoVoice can be used as a tool of outer work (community-advocacy) as a community-based participatory needs assessment. In subsequent years, mental health practitioners increasingly utilized PhotoVoice specifically for its inherent therapeutic qualities. The following studies highlight additional therapeutic applications of the modality which may provide inspiration for a co-working posture between global mental health workers and their FDP partners.

**PhotoVoice and FDP Traumatic Stress**

The aforementioned concept of inner and outer work in the context of PhotoVoice is inspired by the Malka et al. (2018) study that, at the community's request, explicitly centered therapeutic impact as the goal of working with children of addicted parents. This adaptation of PhotoVoice potentiated nuanced engagement of traumatic material (NCTSN, n.d.). For example, participants maintained full control over the degree of personal narrative exposure through their images, which simultaneously helped to differentiate, contain, and symbolize chosen aspects of their lived experience (Malka et al., 2018).

Gupta et al., in their 2019 article "Eyes on the Street: PhotoVoice, Liberation Psychology and the Emotional Landscapes of Urban Children," also make a point to highlight the capacity of PhotoVoice as a therapeutic intervention at the community level. At the request of a local African American disadvantaged neighborhood, the team aimed to accomplish three goals in their work: to empower children by imparting the marketable skill of photography, to support the children's desire for community change (or outer work) and as a therapeutic intervention addressing the impact of socio-political trauma inherent to growing up in a marginalized community (inner work) (p. 1). The authors firmly anchor the inner-work aspect of their study in the practice of Liberation Psychology, which, as previously mentioned, works to create critical consciousness from the perspective that political oppression is linked to traumatic stress within both individuals and communities at large (2019).

On day one of the intervention, the authors introduced photography as an expressive medium that potentiates the activation of empathy within the viewer. Together, participants experimented with the use of various angles and lighting in their photography, purposefully reflecting on the felt sense generated by the various images. On day two, Gupta et al. (2018) shared an evolutionary framework of emotions (McLaren, 2010) that supported participants

in both identifying their emotions as well as validating the many ways emotions can lead to change in communities. On day three, the authors invited participants to present two personally captured images they felt communicated strong emotions, one positive and one negative. In the interest of building participant self-awareness, group members reflected on the felt sense generated by the images and labeled them with the help of a feelings chart. Gupta et al. (2018) report that by enlanguaging the complex emotions stirred by each image, "the youth seemed to empathically identify with one another and offer each other a comforting, responsive stance…. the PhotoVoice program served as a kind of group therapy" (p. 5). On the final workshop day, participants reflected on their work by both captioning their images and crafting artist statements that included a specific action step for change in their community. The event culminated in a professional photography exhibit of the children's creations and desires for social change in a local church.

The authors acknowledged some group members' resistance to enlanguaging the traumatic reactions represented in numerous images (Gupta et al., 2018). In future iterations of this intervention, they recommended honoring participants' boundaries, while simultaneously engaging them in therapeutic discussion of what may be occurring for them internally. This adaptation of PhotoVoice affirms that participants' emotions are valid, introduces emotions as informants regarding the need for community change, and provides both "psychological and artistic skills that [participants] can harness throughout their lives…to transform emotions into power, suffering into voice, and trauma into action" (p. 6).

**PhotoVoice and FDP Acculturation Stress**

Tippens et al. (2021) present a different angle on the use of PhotoVoice in their study on cultural bereavement and resilience with Yazidi women resettled in the Midwest United States. Social service stakeholders in a predominantly Yazidi resettlement area commissioned the study in order to learn how to better serve the area's growing Yazidi population. As

previously mentioned, Tippens et al. (2021) caution the use of foreign frameworks of mental health diagnoses in favor of grounding their work in the theoretical concepts of cultural bereavement and resilience. Like Freire (Jarldorn, 2021), the authors chose to not medicalize the felt experience of sociopolitical trauma, but rather saw it as a doorway toward both identifying and cultivating culturally embedded processes of resilience carried by the community into their land of resettlement. This application of PhotoVoice partners with displaced communities in developing an integrated sense of self in their new land, a major protective factor against acculturation stress (NCTSN, n.d.). By moving into the pain of identifying what was lost in forced displacement, the practitioners supported communities in identifying "the everyday processes" (Tippens et al., 2021, p. 1488) that comprise the protective factors undergirding resilience. For example, Yazidi participants shared the grieving tradition of women cutting off their hair and hanging it in the cemetery when enduring the loss of a loved one. The local Yazidi cemetery provided opportunity for this culturally embedded process to support emotional expression and resilience of the grieving Yazidi population.

The research team was comprised of the female Yazidi co-founder of the Midwestern Yazidi Society, three female, western PhD students and an ethnically Yazidi female masters-level student (Tippens et al., 2021). The nine participants, who were 19 years or older, were recruited from the pool of Yazidi women engaged in their local community centers. The majority of participants had no formal education and had lived in the United States an average of eight years. Two separate PhotoVoice groups, one with older women and one with mothers of younger children, were each held for eight weeks. Meetings consisted of printing photographs from the previous week's invitation, sharing images through group discussion, and identifying major themes. Discussion topics that formed the base of each week's photographic exploration can be seen below.

**Table 1.**

*PhotoVoice Session Map (Tippens et al., 2021, p. 1490)*

| Session number | Discussion topics linked to photographic prompts |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Identifying participants' health priorities |
| 2 | Health and well-being in resettlement city |
| 3 | Describing and identifying impediments to meaningful community |
| 4 | Identifying community strengths and resources |
| 5 | Cultural traditions and strengths |
| 6 | Cultural preservation and new traditions in resettlement city |
| 7 | Identity and belonging |

PhotoVoice sessions were audio recorded by permission and transcribed into a database with thematic coding created by the researchers. Recordings of contextualizing the images were made in place of writing captions and narratives due to the complex linguistic situation and lack of literacy in English. The Yazidi co-researchers then addressed any inconsistencies in the categorizing of themes prior to sharing outcomes of the research with group participants.

The final meeting served as a time to plan an exhibit of the participants' work for their desired audience: their host community of Midwestern Americans. The women hosted a photographic exhibition at a World Refugee Day event in a nearby city and shared the outcomes of their research with the city's refugee health commission that initially requested the study. Narrative analysis of how the participants "overcome hardship and adversity to promote psychosocial resilience" (Tippens et al., 2021, p. 1499) identified three main themes: the participants' experience of trauma and cultural bereavement, engaging cultural idioms as comfort, and transmission of culture.

**PhotoVoice and FDP Isolation Stress**

In September of 2014 the PhotoVoice website posted guidelines for utilizing the protocol in support of young refugee integration. Developed out of PhotoVoice's "New Londoners Project" (2014), the manual provides a step-by-step guide on how to incorporate photography and group work toward reducing isolation stress (NCTSN, n.d.) in forcibly displaced communities, particularly those of adolescents and young adults. It also provides information on data management, ethically responsible practice, and support for designing and running workshops according to the 2014 guidelines.

According to the Photography for Integration, the major goal of young refugees is to build relationships in their new community (PhotoVoice, 2014). The guidelines cite this as a major impact of Photography for Integration as well as the benefits of providing a safe place to explore one's newly expanded identity in a modality not entirely dependent on language proficiency. Themes of sessions include exploring basic photography and captioning skills, making an image map of their immediate surroundings, creation of visual dictionaries for learning new vocabulary, and exploration one's identity in their new land. PhotoVoice (2014) lists opportunity for self-expression, creating a record of one's life, and the possibility to explore the culture and environment of one's new home in community with others as additional benefits for FDP's enduring isolation stress. While I could find no studies on the efficacy of this program, I present it here as an option for exploration by community service organizations partnering with forcibly displaced populations.

**Table 2**

*Category of refugee stress and example case study*

| Type of Refugee Stress (NCTSN, n.d.) | PhotoVoice Case Study Example |
| --- | --- |

| Traumatic Stress | • Using PhotoVoice with children of addicted parents to integrate phenomenological and social reality. (Malka et al., 2017)<br>• Eyes on the Street (Gupta et al., 2018) |
| --- | --- |
| Resettlement Stress | • PhotoVoice: Concept, methodology and use for participatory needs assessment. (Wang and Burris, 1997) * |
| Acculturation Stress | • Cultural bereavement and Resilience in Refugee Resettlement: A PhotoVoice study with Yazidi women in the Midwest United States (Tippens et al., 2021) |
| Isolation Stress | • Photography for Integration: A Resource for Running Photography Projects with Young Refugees. (PhotoVoice, 2014) |

*Can also serve as a model for general needs assessment with FDP populations to determine which, or what mix, of refugee stressor(s) or need(s) to be addressed.

## Necessity of the Co-working Posture: A Word of Caution

It is important for the reader to be aware that utilization of PhotoVoice with the forcibly displaced requires fidelity to the modality's theoretical foundations. Frazier, in her 2019 article, "When Fieldwork Fails: Participatory Visual Research Methods and Fieldwork Encounters with Resettled Refugees," highlights a number of barriers to applying PhotoVoice when working with forcibly displaced populations. She notes that resettled people are "hard to reach…or hidden populations" (p. 135), which can be a challenge for researchers. This issue placed her work at the mercy of "gatekeepers" (p. 135) who ran refugee resettlement

agencies in her city, causing a myriad of delays. Frazier also notes that refugees are prone to "research fatigue" (p. 136), which combined with the inherent power imbalance, "demands special ethical consideration, as non-reflexive research can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities" (p. 136). With these difficulties, Frazier often found that her subjects conflated her role with that of the resettlement agency staff whom they relied upon for crucial financial and social support. This compounded the author's ethical concerns. Refugee job commitments, cultural differences, and lack of desire to participate halted the work.

I posit that the myriad of frustrations leading to the failure of Frazier's (2019) study can be boiled down to one issue. Unlike the previous three studies, Frazier's work was predicated on a personal need to complete a PhD, not the expressed need of a naturally occurring community. Instead of approaching local resettlement agencies to ask how her research skills could support the community's felt needs, she alone designed the research goals with no input from community insiders. As Frazier did not identify a natural community with whom to work, she was unable to partner with any community-identified goals. This lack of community engagement meant there was no one to benefit from the researcher's goals but herself.  Due to this, both social cohesion between participants and motivation to participate in the study were absent. This posture is antithetical to the Freirean and Liberatory principles upon which PhotoVoice is built. Sadly, this awareness does not seem to be present for the author, as the description of her self-described "fieldwork failure" (p. 133) did not mention the lack of expressed need by a naturally occurring community. Frazier did, however, reflect on her research as "neo-colonial and extractive" (p. 140). Frazier's generous transparency regarding her research posture and design highlights the necessity of community partnership, voice, and agency in the utilization of Photovoice.

The table below provides a comparison of the four PhotoVoice studies presented in this thesis. It highlights the centrality of the co-working posture, especially community partnership and participatory methods, to the success of project ventures.

**Table 3**

*Case study comparison chart*

| Study | Applied Theories | Goal | Community Initiation | Participatory Goal Creation | Participatory Data Analysis | Outer work | Inner work | Examples of Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Wang & Burris (1997)** | Freirean problem posing education, feminist psychology | Community-based needs assessment | Yes | Yes | Yes | Explicit | Implicit | Increased women's access to power, improved infrastructure in women's community |
| **Gupta et al. (2018)** | Liberation psychology, psychology of emotion | Processing socio-political trauma | Yes | No | Yes | Explicit | Explicit | Enhanced community bonds, reduced PTSD symptomology, supported children's social advocacy |
| **Tippens et al. (2021)** | Cultural bereavement and resilience | Making explicit various cultural tools contributing to resilience | Yes | Yes | No | Explicit | Implicit | Initiated funding opportunities to build place of worship, exhibition for host community, explicated cultural idioms of suffering useful in clinical practice with Yazidi population |
| **Frazier (2019)** | Feminist psychology | Highlighting issues affecting resettlement and integration of refugees | No | No | No data were produced | Absent | Absent | Project failure |

**Additional Benefits of PhotoVoice with FDP Communities**

As an expressive arts therapist working in global mental health, I am ever curious about the plethora of healing potential held within the creative expressions of various cultures. Though art is an international phenomenon, it is not a universal language that clearly communicates across cultural lines (Schrag & Van Buren, 2018). My passion lies at the intersection of community health, community arts, and the common physiological mechanisms this combination impacts to promote emotional and neurological healing. In my presentation of PhotoVoice, I do not assume that photography is a meaningful artform in all cultures, despite the fact that is more accessible now than ever before. The modality can serve, however, as a community-based research tool for arts-informed mental health providers to partner with minoritized populations in discovering and employing locally meaningful artforms for self/community expression and healing. It is not uncommon for marginalized and persecuted communities to have suppressed beloved creative forms in order to survive oppression (2018). PhotoVoice lends itself to shining a light on these artistic resources that may be resurrected and adapted as a tool for resilience in a new homeland.

It is also important to highlight the many opportunities for intermodal transfer afforded by PhotoVoice. Natalie Rogers (1993) introduced the idea of transitioning from one art form to another in the interest of both neural and emotional integration. PhotoVoice participants may be invited to respond to their own and others' images through various locally meaningful forms of creative communication. Participants may benefit from transferring the felt emotions in their images into other culturally meaningful movement, for example, a poetic form, dance, handcraft, or song. These local art forms, as posited by Wessells (2021), are expressions of cultural identity, a major component of well-being. Each intermodal shift has the potential to not only strengthen the displaced community's sense of

identity, but also to promote regulation of the nervous system, support the community in integrating their experience, and potentiate locally valuable meaning-making in support of well-being (Perry, as cited in Malchiodi, 2015).

<div align="center">

**Co-working with Communities When Photography Is Ill-advised**

</div>

In this thesis I am recommending PhotoVoice as a useful modality for respectful co-working with forcibly displaced communities. Due to certain cultural, religious, or political factors, however, photograph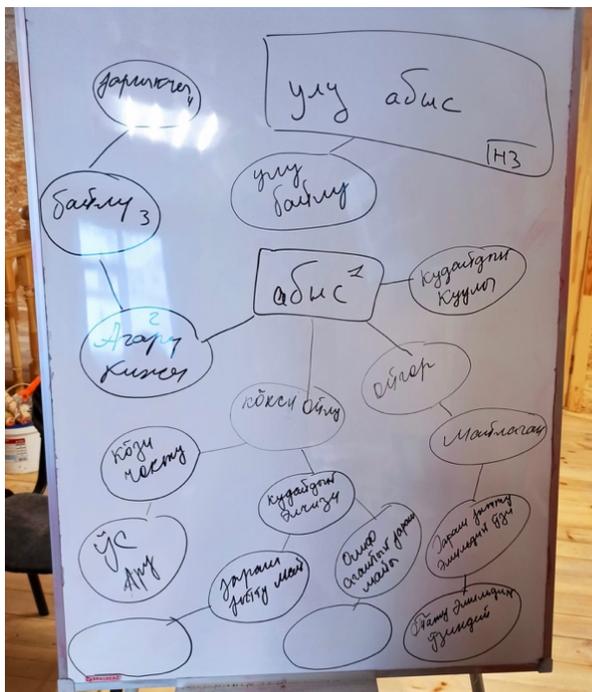y may not be an option of discovery in some communities. In the interest of global mental health practitioners having respectful resources for their work, I offer an effective alternative grounded in the person-centered theory of Carl Rogers (Saurman, 2021). Drs. Todd and Mary Beth Saurman developed a plethora of ways to engage communities in unearthing heritage resources for community healing (Saurman, 2012; Saurman, 2021). Inviting communities to reflect on meaningful sensory memories (for example, sounds, tastes, smells, movements etc.) from their youth to the present time can be one way of building a bank of locally meaningful artforms from which to draw (Saurman, 2021, p. 110). Creating a mind map (see Figure 1 above) of such discoveries can facilitate further ideas.



**Figure 1**
***Community generated mind map of Altai song genres***
 (J. Randolph, personal communication, October 16, 2021)

Practitioners and communities needing a non-photocentric path for discovery may find value in applying the Saurman's (2021) 3-D model:

1) Discover: cultural insiders conduct reflexive discovery into locally valuable means of artistic communication

2) Decide: cultural insiders decide which of these forms is most suited to the healing or developmental task at hand

3) Develop: cultural insiders begin connecting creative resources to their healing or developmental goals.

The reader may note similarities to PhotoVoice's data collection through images, community discussions of images, and selecting meaningful themes for healing or development (Wang & Burris, 1997). Community initiative leads each step of the process as cultural outsiders hold space and engage with open-ended curiosity.

**Discussion**

Wessells (2021) provides practitioners guiding principles and actionable suggestions for assuming a co-working posture with forcibly displaced communities, which he calls an "agentic approach" (p.145). He emphasizes the necessity of assuming a culturally humble, "reflexive, self-critical orientation" (p.145), which one embodies by purposefully setting aside the mantle of "expert" (pg. 145) in exchange for becoming a self-described student of the community in question's culturally embedded processes of resilience. Cultural humility and a reflexive posture require practitioners to acknowledge and purposefully examine their own implicit biases that may assume helplessness and deficiency on the part of displaced communities. Finally, humble and purposefully reflexive practitioners seek to understand the negative impacts potentiated by the extreme power differentials at play between the practitioner and displaced community. This awareness encourages self-aware practitioners to engage communities with curiosity and the purposeful sharing of power with insider colleagues (2021).

Wessells, (2021) further engages the idea of curiosity in partnering with forcibly displaced communities. He encourages practitioners to engage in qualitative, ethnographic, and narrative methods of research, as each of these methodologies centers the worldview of FDP communities. Open-ended questions that invite local categories and definitions to the fore are essential for promoting agency and a path forward with displaced communities. Of particular interest to myself as an expressive arts therapy practitioner is Wessells' encouragement of local arts, also known as locally meaningful forms of communication (Saurman, 2021), as avenues beyond interviews or group discussions for centering the problem solving powers of local partners. Local narrative storytelling forms, traditional weaving patterns, various meaningful forms of poetry or visual art, and so much more already exist within communities. These learned, shared forms of communication serve as vessels of culture that may facilitate meaningful grounding movement for the body, communication of the community's shared experience, and meaning making that contributes to the development well-being (Perry as cited in Malchiodi, 2015).

In light of these recommendations for practitioners, this thesis briefly outlines the complexity of forcibly displaced people's lived experiences and asks how global mental health practitioners can assume a co-working posture with FDP communities. I highlight authors who argue for mental health NGOs abandoning foreign descriptors of psychopathology in favor of eliciting locally held frameworks of struggle and healing. Liberation psychology and Freirean perspectives are presented as grounding theory for, as Brykalski and Rayes (2018) encourage, treating forcibly displaced communities as "insightful colleagues and…psychologists" (p.38) in their own right. Inspired by these theories, I introduce the reader to PhotoVoice, an expressive arts modality capable of doubling as both a community-based research model and reflexive therapeutic praxis. The studies presented in this thesis exemplify how PhotoVoice is capable of addressing the four categories of refugee

stress (inner work) as well as the "outer work" of community advocacy. It appears that PhotoVoice potentiates respectful, healing cross-cultural partnerships with the forcibly displaced when their own worldview is respected as a vital to program structure and evaluation at every level.

## Recommendations

Based on information gathered in this thesis, I put forth the following recommendations for global mental health care workers engaged with forcibly displaced communities. Foreign mental health workers must engage mindful reflexivity. According to Wessells (2021), this looks like purposefully assuming a posture of cultural humility, in effect viewing partner communities as the experts on both their own history and supportive resources. Foreign staff must then regularly interrogate their own assumptions, actions, and motivations where partner communities are concerned. This thesis promotes acting only on intentions that support awareness and resourcing from within the community itself, unless directly chosen by community partners with whom power is equally shared.

I offer Freire's non-pathologizing, liberatory posture (Jarldorn, 2021) as a vital aspect to this approach. In this way, practitioners apply the term "disordered" not to traumatized members of forcibly displaced communities but rather to the context that potentiates them. From this posture, members of displaced communities are treated as valued colleagues in joint pursuit of community well-being (Brykalski & Rayes, 2018), rather than helpless victims dependent on culturally illiterate outsiders. Based on the writings of Tippens et al. (2021) and Wessells (2021), I recommend that practitioners practice curiosity regarding community cultural frameworks of suffering and healing, rather than full dependence on foreign diagnostic categories. This warm curiosity regarding community ontology may open the doors to further exploration of community resources and methods of meaning making.

I recommend global mental health workers recognize the therapeutic benefits of community-based research methods, like PhotoVoice. While the modality appears to enjoy wide acceptance in community development and social advocacy circles, I posit that global mental health practice could greatly benefit from expanded engagement with the method. When practiced with fidelity to the protocol's theoretical foundation, PhotoVoice offers proverbial "handrails" for practitioners and FDPs to engage the four categories of refugee stress (NCTSN, nd) at a community level. This is of vital importance in that the majority world functions from a collectivist worldview, which stands in stark contrast to the individualist cultural backgrounds of many foreign NGO workers. The theoretical and practical make-up of PhotoVoice both acknowledges this reality and provides a flexible pathway for navigating healing work in respectful partnership.

Finally, I recommend that when possible, practitioners lean into the healing function of local expressive arts potentiated by the creative nature of PhotoVoice. Provided that photography is a viable option for community members, rediscovering and engaging the community's creative resources becomes a possibility. Local creative resources that serve to regulate the nervous system, represent or enlanguage overwhelming experiences, and facilitate the making of meaning for communities may facilitate community well-being in a way that imported modalities cannot. I posit that PhotoVoice, with its warmly curious posture, increases access to these meaningful community resources.

## Recommendations for Further Learning and Research

For those interested to contemplating the possibilities presented in this thesis, I highly recommend accessing the aforementioned authors (Wessells, Brykalski & Reyes, Namer & Razum, Jarldorn, Jacquez et al.) and PhotoVoice studies (Wang & Burris, Wang, Tippens et al., Gupta et al., Frazier, Malka et al., PhotoVoice). For those wishing to further embrace

local artforms in respectful, healing partnership with forcibly displaced communities, I recommend Schrag and Van Buren and Drs. Saurman.

More scholarship is needed to support the use of PhotoVoice as an explicitly therapeutic modality in the field of global mental health. Comparative scholarship examining the therapeutic efficacy of the modality, versus importing foreign expressive modalities, in the cross-cultural setting may encourage practitioners to believe that such engagement is not only possible, but effective. Studies examining practitioner attitudes and experience of PhotoVoice projects with forcibly displaced communities may also support growth of the modality in global mental health circles. A comparative study on the use of PhotoVoice in support of local ontology defining the phenomenological reality of FDPs versus the utility of foreign diagnostic and treatment models would also clarify the usefulness of propositions made in this thesis. As the numbers of forcibly displaced people continues burgeoning, global mental health practitioners have the responsibility to both promote and practice dignifying modes of engagement with our fellow humans.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

**Lesley University**
**Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences**
**Expressive Therapies Division**
**Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy, MA**

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**Type of Project: Thesis**

**Title:** Toward a Co-Working Posture in Global Mental Health:

A Literature Review on the Use of PhotoVoice in Partnership

with Forcibly Displaced Populations

_____

**Date of Graduation:** _May 21, 2022_____

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:**__Carla Velasquez-Garcia_____ _____