

**Food as Lived Experience: A Photovoice with High School Youth**

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## Food as Lived Experience: A Photovoice with High School Youth

### Introduction/Need for the Study

Understanding the lived experiences of individuals is a vital component of a complete food justice perspective (Bradley, 2019; Broad, 2016). Lived experiences reveal *what* is happening to people without which we cannot fully identify solutions to issues in the food system (Fischler, 1988). In this study, students were asked to provide their perspectives on food through art which culminated in a community gallery show. Youth provide a unique perspective because of their lack of economic responsibility and somewhat limited awareness of food issues. They provide a uniquely insurgent potential for intervention. This inquiry explored the lived experiences of youth related to food through their photography and conversations.

### The Photovoice

The phenomenological perspective, much aligned with the photovoice methodology, is the description and interpretation of human experience (Seamon, 2013). It recognizes that the world is shaped and interpreted by humans, finding that meaning comes from human experience. The world is meaningful and that meaning comes from the amalgamation of meanings people ascribe to the world through their experiences. Meaning can be altered by social networks, personal experiences, and the context of the world surrounding us (Seamon, 2013). This view is useful in understanding individual perspectives on food, as it is deeply engrained and integrated into daily life. Photovoice allows participants to use art and their narratives to explain their lived experiences. Understanding these lived experience grounded this research in real-life events and allowed investigators to understand how and where radical food movements occur on a personal level in the community. Speaking with the youth provides a unique perspective which gives information on institutions such as schools, families, community programs, and social dynamics.

### Methodology

This photovoice involved three conversations: a focus group with all participants; a one-on-one or two-on-one interview participants; and a final meeting with all students. Each participant gave permission to use their names in the publications but only first names are used here. Joyce and Patience are sophomores; Joyce arrived in the U.S. at three months old from Cote d'Ivoire and Patience arrived at three years old from the same country. T'sheten came from Southeast Asian when she was three years old. Ikra from Somalia had spent years in Kenya before immigrating to Iowa. Zach and Mary, juniors, are the only white participants in the study. We had conversations in a conference room at Creative Visions – a place-based, black owned community-centered nonprofit. Holding conversations in a place that provides food assistance likely brought food security to the forefront of the participants' minds. I met with the participants prior to this conversation at their school. I arrived early with snack foods, both healthy and unhealthy, and ordered a pizza. The students arrived in pairs or alone. Once everyone was settled around the conference table and the recording devices were in place, we started our conversation. After going over the consent forms, we jumped into a discussion about food. Rather than starting with a generic ice breaker, I brought a large poster board and asked everyone to – while getting food and snacks – write or draw on the poster board something that explains what food means to them. We took turns responding and asking follow-up questions of the participants when they explained their answers. Participants immediately identified most of the major themes I had researched pertaining to food studies. In the second round, I met with participants alone or in pairs. Because I brought food items to each meeting, we had a conversation about what they ate. Joyce added to the poster during our interview. The next day, I met with Joyce and Patience

again, this time with their photos of food. A third conversation was scheduled to come back together to discuss the project and reflect on what they learned and how they felt about the work. I met with participants enough to gain their narratives and an understanding of their lived experiences with food. Finally, the culmination of the photovoice project was an *art show* held at [organization] to empower participants and incite action with people from other organizations.

### Results

Three themes emerged that we categorized as food means “body/health”, “care”, and “identity”. *Food means body*, you are what you eat is one statement that was iterated during our first meeting. On the poster, participants wrote energy, sustenance, energy and health, pointing to their knowledge of the importance of food in physical and even mental performance. One participant said, “people eat too much McDonald’s”, implying there are too many unhealthy foods in the region. Most participants reported regularly eating at home with their families and discussed the importance of health and knowing what one puts into their body. Mary’s mention of carb-loading for swimming pertains to health; food is necessary to maintain energy levels, but with consuming the correct amount. *Food means care*, studying food and the relationship it has to the home and family unit can uncover issues in power, societal expectations, and structures. Zach talked about his mother in his first photo. He talked about how children who play outside often come in briefly, ask their mother to make some food, then rush back out to climb more trees. He specifically mentioned *mother, not father* in this statement. Likewise, Ikra, T’sheten, Patience, and Mary all mentioned their mothers when discussing family dinners. They implied their mothers are the ones responsible for making food for the family. Ikra, Patience, and Joyce all talked about having responsibilities of cooking, too; “sometimes, mom tells me like, “you’re cooking tomorrow”” Joyce reported; T’sheten replied, “I cook for my sister.” It is clear these students have responsibilities when it comes to food that relate to family dynamics. *Food means identity*: identity and culture were the most talked about themes. It was not surprising with such a diverse group of youth. I asked Joyce and Patience about where they buy their groceries. While their mothers do shop at C Fresh (a local international grocery store), Wal-Mart, ... but they also African stores. They were not aware of their names, but said, “There are a lot of African stores but they’re very... closed off. It won’t really look like a store unless you go inside.” T’sheten spoke of Asian food stores but also of how foods bring different culture together. “I think [food] also brings people together, like, from different cultures. You’re not forgetting your culture.”

### Conclusion

This photovoice project revealed the importance of food in daily life for youth and for community members. The themes – health, care, and identity – were revealed to be important to the participants. Participants mentioned health in a dogmatic manner; these youth have been told about the importance of paying attention to health of food. The conversations and attention were much more dynamic and energetic when they focused on care and identity. This group of participants included four immigrants, so the tie to identity was strong among them.

### Implications

Understanding the lived experiences related to food is vital to food justice initiatives. If interventions are not reflected in the everyday lived experiences of the target population, they will not succeed. Youth have the unique perspective of immersion in family and friend culture while remaining free of economic responsibility for food. The themes these participants came up with indicate what is important in their food system. The perspectives of these youth fill a gap that must be addressed in food justice initiatives informed by storytelling and lived experiences.

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