

**Framing Rural Realities: Exploring Youth Perspectives Of
Rural Communities Through Photovoice**

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Introduction

Rural America is often plagued with persistent poverty, population decline, and poor education, proving “that rural development is not a major concern in national policy” (Carr & Kefalas, 2011, p. 140; Danbom, 2006). Of Oklahoma’s population, 34% is estimated to live in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). As populations continue dropping in these rural communities, thousands of towns are only 20, 10, or even five years away from extinction due to the declining number of taxpayers, consumers, and workforce participants (Carr & Kefalas, 2011). The decision young adults make to stay in their rural hometown or leave has powerful repercussions for rural America’s future (Carr & Kefalas, 2011). As rural populations continue to decrease, communities struggle to find replacements for the small-town professionals, such as doctors, business owners, and teachers (Carr & Kefalas, 2011). Therefore, understanding the perspectives of youth in rural Oklahoma is essential in making a positive change within rural development. The research questions asked within this study are as follows: (1) How do rural youth perceive the strengths of their community?; (2) How do rural youth perceive the weaknesses of their community?; (3) What opportunities do rural youth see for their future within their home community?; (4) What threats do rural youth perceive within their community?; (5) What do rural youth find unique about their rural community?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Critical consciousness is the understanding of inequality within a system and taking a positive action within these systems to create change (El-Amin et al., 2017). This theory aims to increase youth understanding of injustice within communities and systems through three components: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action (Watts et al., 2011). These components allow youth to gain knowledge and conceptualize of injustice and the concepts of Critical Consciousness (Watts, et al. 2011).

Community capitals framework allows community and economic analyzation and development within a systematic approach, applied to identify capitalistic assets, invested capital, capital interaction, and the overall results of the impact of capital within a community (Emery & Flora, 2006). Community capitals framework can be used to “inform decision making” (Panzarella et al., 2023, para. 10), and “analyze communities and community development efforts from a systems perspective” (Mattos, 2015, para. 2).

Methods

Photovoice engages individuals with overshadowed opinions to deepen the understanding behind a particular issue (Amos et al., 2012). Wang and Burris (1997) used the term “photovoice,” combining the word “photo” with the acronym Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience (VOICE) (p. 381). The goal of a photovoice study is to foster self-empowerment within the participants by giving them an opportunity to share daily life stories through photographs (Amos et al., 2012).

Fifteen Grandfield school based agricultural education students were recruited as co-researchers for the photovoice study. The data collection consisted of a two-month process, with monthly group meetings and debriefing sessions. Within this study, qualitative data analysis was used to interpret and evaluate findings from Grandfield school based agricultural education members. Co-researchers were asked to analyze their community through a modified SWOT analysis

approach. Photographs within photovoice studies are not data, but the co-researcher's interpretations of their photographs serve as data analyzed by the research team. This focus group lasted around four hours. Results were triangulated using data from meeting transcriptions, photo captions, and the P.H.O.T.O forms submitted. The focus group was coded in MAXQDA2024; the codes were then organized into themes using the theoretical framework.

Results

From the five photovoice prompts assigned, themes within the prompts were distinguished during data coding. Results from this study revealed several themes: agricultural and economic opportunities, the desires of community members to serve one another, and the community gathering as one were recognized as strengths within the community. Weaknesses and challenges within the community overlapped in ideas, such as lack of supply and demand in financial capital, human capital resources such as leadership and community hospitality, as well as deteriorating built capital in buildings, roads, and properties. Moreover, co-researchers determined some challenges within their community were manageable, such as vacant buildings being business opportunities, and fixing roads as a community service project. Opportunities within the community were described by co-researchers as connection-based, both external and internal, as their community's social capital will lead them on paths to success through education, agriculture, and themselves being role models for upcoming generations. The uniqueness of Grandfield, Oklahoma was described in a positive way by co-researchers. Co-researchers expressed the uniqueness of cultural differentiation in their community, interesting businesses, and traditions and success stories of their rural community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Critical consciousness is the ability to understand systems of inequality and acting within these systems to create change (El-Amin et al., 2017). Themes were addressed and created by co-researchers, co-researchers noticed the positives of rural life within each of the five prompts assigned. Moreover, co-researchers voiced components of their rural lifestyle they want changed or can change. These components allow youth to conceptualize and gain knowledge and understanding of injustice and the concepts of critical consciousness (Watts, et al. 2011). Moreover, co-researchers found positives and negatives within their community, coinciding with community capitals. Community capital identification allows for the understanding of community relationships, changes, processes, and outcomes (Watts et al., 2011).

Future research should conduct this same project in other rural Oklahoma communities across the state. This could offer an altered insight of the differentiation between rural community life within Oklahoma's unique regions and economic differences across the state. To thoroughly understand an unbiased perception of rural communities, this study should be conducted with a younger generation of co-researchers. This could allow for an innocent and callow perception, helping policymakers and leaders better understand the upcoming generations perspective of their rural community.

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