

Photovoice with care: A creative and accessible method for representing lived experiences.

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Photovoice is a research method with great promise as a tool for people looking to tell stories about their lives and work toward change, it also has much to offer criminology, creating insightful material from the perspectives of those most intimately connected to the research topic.¹ This article reflects on photovoice as a resource for lived experience practitioners, activists, and leaders. The work we reflect upon is a co-designed, participatory study of a community-led crime prevention organisation: 'Reformed'.² We (Natasha and Kemi) founded Reformed after being released from prison to multiple barriers and low expectations from criminal justice professionals.

Natasha and Kemi are community practitioners and activists. Gill is a social work lecturer and researcher. We bring different skills and strengths to our work together. Gill is a trained academic and more comfortable writing than speaking, Natasha and Kemi are impactful, influential speakers. In our co-teaching and co-research work,^{2,3} Gill often leads on writing, but this does not accurately reflect the contribution that Natasha and Kemi have made to the production of knowledge. Here, we have worked differently. We (Natasha and Kemi) spoke to Gill about our experience

of photovoice (so are the lead authors of this piece). Gill has written up our words and made links to academic work in this area.

'Lived experience' workers use direct personal experience of a social issue/issues to inform social change work.⁴ This kind of involvement is increasingly prominent across social services,⁵ but there has been a lack of research on lived experience-led services and more 'is needed from the perspectives of those who have experienced incarceration to better inform this topic' (p.13).⁶ Our study — and this reflection — were influenced by participatory action research (or 'PAR'), which assumes that people impacted by a topic should be co-researchers.⁷ University-community partnerships enable communities to benefit from the knowledge, expertise, and material resources housed in a university,⁸ and universities to benefit from the 'local knowledge',⁹ and viable solutions of experts by experience.¹⁰

This discussion considers what it was like to collaborate with an academic partner and represent community-led work through photographs. We reflect on the benefits and limits of photovoice and emphasise the importance of relationships and care within research collaborations.

1. Fitzgibbon, W., & Stengel, C. M. (2018). Women's voices made visible: Photovoice in visual criminology. *Punishment & Society*, 20(4), 411-431.
2. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.
3. Buck, G., Harriott, P., Ryan, K., Ryan, N., & Tomczak, P. (2020). All our justice: people with convictions and 'participatory' criminal justice. In H. McLaughlin, P. Beresford, C. Cameron, H. Casey, & J. Duffy (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Service User Involvement in Human Services Research and Education* (pp. 285-295). Routledge.
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5. Buck, G., Tomczak, P., & Quinn, K. (2022). This is how it feels: Activating lived experience in the penal voluntary sector. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(4), 822-839.
6. Duvnjak, A., Stewart, V., Young, P., & Turvey, L. (2022). How does lived experience of incarceration impact upon the helping process in social work practice? A scoping review. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52(1), 354-73.
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8. Knight, C., & Gitterman, A. (2018). Merging micro and macro intervention: Social work practice with groups in the community. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 54(1), 3-17.
9. Fals Borda, O. (1988). *Knowledge and people's power: Lessons with peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia*. New Horizons Press.
10. Peralta, K. J. (2017). Toward a deeper appreciation of participatory epistemology in community-based participatory research. *PRISM: A Journal of Regional Engagement*, 6(1), 45-56.

Our history

Natasha and Kemi are sisters. We served our prison sentences together, have supported each other through barriers and direct discrimination since release, and have a strong bond. We met Gill in 2012 and have worked together teaching university students about marginalisation, racism, and community activism. Over the years our relationship has become more like workmates. This is important context for what we reflect on later.

The photovoice study

In 2020, we explained to Gill that we wanted some evidence of the impact of Reformed. Gill suggested photovoice — a method in which people use cameras to document their lives and advocate for change.¹¹ Gill told us about a local partnership that was funding practitioners and academics to form research partnerships. Together we planned a timeline to train community members, take photos, and discuss results, and Gill wrote up a funding bid. We secured the money to pay us for our time on the research, print the photos for an exhibition, and cater the exhibition so the community could see the images and eat with us. Gill also applied to the university ethics committee, as we wanted to make sure our project was safely planned and the dignity and wellbeing of people taking part was considered. We planned the ethical application together, guided by Economic and Social Research Council good practice for social research (2020). Inspired by Wendel and colleagues, we took these steps to carry out the study:¹²

1. Co-researchers (Natasha, Kemi, and Gill) met to co-design training.

In contrast to western democracy and capitalism, which are dominated by individualism and competitiveness, Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of their relationships with others.

2. Co-researchers delivered training, explaining the study to participants, sharing photography skills,¹³ and considering how participant-photographers could keep themselves and others safe.
 3. Participant group (one researcher, four staff members, and four people who have used the service — nine in total) took photographs to prompts: *'Why is Reformed needed? and What does the work of Reformed mean to you?'*
 4. Participants selected 4-5 images each to discuss in online focus groups.
 5. In groups, each participant explained the meaning of their photographs and discussed others' photographs. Common themes were identified as a group.
 6. Co-researchers wrote a social work journal article to share findings and presented results to a national Criminology Conference.¹⁴
 7. Co-researchers held public exhibitions in Warrington and Liverpool.¹⁵
- Our approach aligned with 'Ubuntu',¹⁶ a dominant philosophy in sub-Saharan African countries, which values caring, sharing, respect, compassion, and ways of organising that benefit all. In contrast to western democracy and capitalism, which are dominated by individualism and competitiveness, Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of their relationships with others. In research, this shifts our role as researchers from *taking, owning, and using* others' data to *sharing* ownership and use of data. Ubuntu-based research emphasises consensus in decision-making, collaboration with participants, and community, with respect to people's spirituality, values, and norms. This includes sitting with people, understanding their needs and, if possible, eating with them.

11. Milne, E. J., & Muir, R. (2019). Photovoice: A Critical Introduction. In L. Pauwels, & D. Mannay (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methodologies* (pp. 282-296. Sage.

12. Wendel, M. L., Jackson, T., Ingram, C. M., Golden, T., Castle, B. F., Ali, N. M., & Combs, R. (2019). Yet we live, strive, and succeed: Using photovoice to understand community members' experiences of justice, safety, hope, and racial equity. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*, 2(1), 9.

13. We recruited a trained photographer to share insider tips for using light and ideas to best effect.

14. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.

15. Buck, G. (2022). *Exhibition Report: Reformed Photovoice: A visual narrative of a peer led crime prevention approach*. Available at: <https://teachingpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Insider-and-Outsider-Research-Which-hat-are-you-wearing.pdf>

16. Muwanga-Zake, J. W. (2009). Building bridges across knowledge systems: Ubuntu and participative research paradigms in Bantu communities. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(4), 413-426.

Ubuntu and other communal relational/Black feminist philosophies have helped us to make sense of *Reformed* because they all recognise care and connection as routes to human excellence.^{17 18 19} However, long before we discovered these writings, we had built our working relationship on these values. We have worked with Gill for ten years now on co-teaching and writing projects. Our work has included long discussions about our values over coffee and meals together to celebrate things we have achieved. As time has progressed our working relationship has become more like friendship. This can be a benefit and a challenge to doing research work together.²⁰ On one level we know and trust each other and understand each other's strengths and expectations. However, such personal relationships in research can be criticised as introducing too much 'bias' or even leading to 'exploitation' if boundaries are not clearly set out. These 'forays into friendship' also raise concerns that any unprofessional practices could be ignored.²¹ These are things we have to actively reflect on and guard against.

Reflecting on the study

Gill: What was good about the photovoice project?

Natasha and Kemi: The photovoice project was a unique, effective way to enable individuals to express themselves without feeling judged or pressured. It was a simple method that allowed people to feel comfortable, confident, and to open up. We asked for feedback from every participant and people said that it was a safe environment and they felt comfortable and confident in the roles and tasks. It was simple enough for people to get involved without overthinking things. The individuals involved also had commonalities. They may have had different struggles to overcome, but a lack of support and care from services was something that they all had in common. I know photovoice started off in the

health world, but this method can be used across the board.^{22 23}

Researchers need to be mindful of the people involved, because some researchers start a project and have not actually thought about the person and their complex needs. As we've got to know each other — over years — you (Gill) have been getting to know us, listening, and asking questions. You've been getting to understand the complexities of people with convictions and people from different backgrounds and what can put them off. Anything you approach us with is manageable, not everyone can play that role. The only people that can play this role without our lived experience is someone who is *interested*, someone who wants to *learn more*, and someone who has been *listening*, listening with an understanding of people's needs, that's very important.

Personal relationships in research can be criticised as introducing too much 'bias' or even leading to 'exploitation' if boundaries are not clearly set out.

Gill: What problems did we meet? And can we make improvements?

Natasha and Kemi: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic we decided to move the project online, but this meant participants had to have access to the internet and mobile phones, this limited individuals who couldn't take part because of lack of facilities or poverty. Now we are out of the pandemic we can do things face-to-face and provide cameras.

This photovoice project was powerful, but if you take us out of it, and put someone else in, it might not have the same result. It's about the people involved not going in with judgments. You did not go in with judgments on people and we didn't, so people feel that. So going forward with a method like this, there's got to be an understanding and non-judgement of people in these situations. You have to listen to what the people are saying, not cherry pick the parts that make sense to you. Are we really doing people justice if we're picking what we're going to put in? So, real representation of the people involved.

17. Lorde, A. (2017). *Your silence will not protect you*. Silver Press. Original essays 1984; original poetry 1997.

18. Hooks, B. (2000). *All about love*. New Visions.

19. Mugumbate, J., & Chereni, A. (2019). Using African Ubuntu theory in social work with children in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work*, 9(1), 27–34.

20. Oakley, A. (2016). Interviewing women again: Power, time and the gift. *Sociology*, 50(1), 195–213.

21. Browne, K. (2003). Negotiations and fieldworkings: friendship and feminist research. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2(2), 132–146.

22. Catalani, C., & Minkler, M. (2010). Photovoice: A review of the literature in health and public health. *Health Education & Behavior*, 37(3), 424–451.

23. Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health*, 8(2), 185–192.

Gill: Any tips for future photovoice projects involving people's lived experiences?

Natasha and Kemi: It is important to listen, but also, people involved in this process can't come with a hierarchy. Everyone involved should be valued. Sometimes when people with lived experience are brought into research situations, we're seen as the underdog or the one that is just an 'add-on' to something that's almost completed, so we're like an afterthought. It needs to be a collaborative approach, in which all parties are valued, whether people with lived experience or the academics, because we all bring something unique. We are not academic writers in the slightest, you are, we couldn't have written that journal article alone, but we bring the issue, we have experienced the criminal justice system first-hand, we bring the experience that enables you to write that, so there's value in what we all do.²⁴

It is essential for all those involved to be open to learning to make things better. If we look at the criminal justice system, nothing has changed, nothing's getting better, and we're only getting to the point now where people are beginning to look at us (people with lived experience) as contributing to things. I think that if we were involved in a lot more of the processes and decisions and making things better, I think that we could bring about change. It's alright using these methods, but what are you doing with the information? Just because it's simple doesn't mean it's not valuable. Yes, it's simple but we didn't just capture this information and leave it there.

Gill: Have you got one example, to just bring that to life? Can you give an example of something that's not got better, and maybe an example of how you would do it differently to make it better?

Natasha and Kemi: Off the top of my head: reoffending rates. So, when we were first released from prison the reoffending rates were high. They haven't improved. The one year proven re-offending rate in 2009 was 37 per cent,²⁵ by 2020 the proven reoffending rate after release from custodial sentences was 54.9 per cent.²⁶ Reoffending rates are not looking

at contributing factors. To get an understanding you need to talk to people with that experience. I could have told them from a first-hand experience of feeling like "I wanted to re-offend because society had given up on me", and it's very difficult to get to that point when you want to make a positive change. So, if you talk to me about that situation, I could tell you that there's more to not reoffending than just getting a job and staying out of prison. If you get out and there's no support, you're homeless, you've got no family, you've got poor mental health on top of that, then how can you move forward positively? And what happens is, when decisions are getting made about people within the criminal justice system, none of that is being taken into consideration.

These decisions have been getting made about us from the beginning of time! In our organisation we see first-hand every single day. We've tried to so many times to have our voice valued and help bring a bigger change and we've been ignored. Poor decisions have been made about us, with little or no understanding of the reality surrounding us. Now, I'm not sure whether there is a mistrust in collaborating with those who have lived experiences of the criminal justice system, fed by stereotypes and social biases, but it is time for change. It's time to change our approach, there is a

lack of understanding in rehabilitation services. Do they really want to hear from us? Do they really believe in the change we're trying to make? We still get people saying a leopard never changes their spots. We are 14 years into our journey of providing community services, with all this greatness behind us, more than 15 years crime-free but the system is still not involving us in the process of change, because there are still stereotypes and bias which don't allow you to do that.

People with lived experiences are overlooked and ignored in processes that affect them. One of the benefits of photovoice as a method for understanding experiences is it can include a range of individuals without making people feel uncomfortable about their academic abilities. A lot of people who we support do have confidence issues about where they feel they should be in life academically, so they won't speak up. If they're in an environment where they feel intimidated, if someone is there that they feel is more

It is important to listen, but also, people involved in this process can't come with a hierarchy. Everyone involved should be valued.

24. Buck, G., Ryan, K., & Ryan, N. (2023). Practicing Lived Experience Leadership with Love: Photovoice Reflections of a Community-Led Crime Prevention Project. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 1117-1141.

25. Ministry of Justice (2012). 2012 *Compendium of re-offending statistics and analysis*. Ministry of Justice.

academically advanced it may put them off, but photovoice puts everyone on a level playing field. Everyone said that they felt it was a clear, simple process. Now that means it was designed well, it made them feel confident and comfortable. If you make things too complex for people, especially when people's lives are already complex, it puts them off and they

won't want to take part. Now when I say it's simple, it's also an approach with a lot of richness, just look at what we've done, the rich content that came out of it (see Table 1).

None of the people involved in the photovoice study felt like it damaged them emotionally and none of them felt like they couldn't come back because they

Table 1. Some images and descriptions that came out of the project

			
<p>[Photographer descriptions] 'It's all about the journey. Not where you start or end, but the journey and they guide you every step of the way'.</p>	<p>'Reformed loves imperfections. The bottom of the man is not finished, there are so many places where people with imperfections don't feel comfortable, but in Reformed you can be imperfect and still be as special as somebody who feels they are well rounded'.</p>	<p>'They keep you feeling safe from police brutality and a society that sees Black people as infiltrators even though we were first people on the earth. You've fed people, [older people who were lonely] ... brought people together, not just people with convictions, everyone. What comes with crime prevention is a whole lot of other issues in people's lives'.</p>	<p>'Our children will one day walk in our shoes. Your holistic approach to working with families educates and breaks any negative cycles'.</p>

were embarrassed or because someone was more superior than the other. Everyone knew why they were there, they were confident, and they felt they were able to contribute. And that's important.

Gill: *I just realised that 100 per cent of the people who did the training came back with photos, didn't they? Nobody dropped out.*

Natasha and Kemi: And that's because of the approach. Making things complicated can give people anxiety. Everyone's got different mindsets, and some people are alright with text instructions, some are not. Meeting people and explaining the instructions, they all executed them. For everyone to come back and come back with something, that alone speaks volumes.

Gill: *Do you think this is an approach that people could use while they're in prison?*

Natasha and Kemi: Yes, yes, yes, as long as there is respect. We were protected by officers in prison. What the officers were doing without us knowing at the time, was they were treating us like human beings, they continued to treat us with dignity as a human being and they actually played a big part in us coming out of prison with that fire and ambition in us. Some of the inmates that we used to help, that officers wouldn't help, they weren't being treated like human beings. They would take drugs, take risks because they didn't have the guidance, and they were not being treated like human beings.

It's OK to have great work in prison, but it has to continue on the outside, because if you enhance someone's mindset in prison, which is brilliant, and you

give them a bag of tools with everything they need, if they go into the outside world with them tools and don't achieve because of stereotypes and discrimination, that actually can be more damaging than a person not knowing what's in the tool bag. FAILURE! We know the racism toward people that have not even been to prison... when failure creeps, or someone loses everything, the risk is people consider suicide or do something horrific.

Yes — it's the understanding and the listening. You treat people as a human being. That's the key, that's the first step.

There was a news story recently about a failing mental health system in England, there was a mum who lost her daughter to suicide, and she had written this letter saying 'it's terrible in here, six people trying to restrain me', a really heartfelt letter, really heart-breaking and the mum said the thing that was missing for her daughter was care. There's no care in the services. Now that example is an institutionalised environment, but it applies across the board. In prison we were cared for by [officer name], she would go on holiday and the whole place would be watching us, people used to say, 'leave them they're [officer name]'s babies!' So, if you look at us as an experiment, going in as young offenders and how they loved and cared for us, look at the result on our mindset coming out! If we were not treated like human beings and cared for and loved, you may not have known us because we would have left prison with no self-care, but we came out of prison with fire! Wanting to do well, volunteering. That thread of care needs to be consistent for all and have a connection from prison into rehabilitation services.

If you're cared for and supported in the right way, it does make you want to do better. If you get to a point where you realise 'this system doesn't care about me, no-one wants the best for me, why am I wasting my time getting treated like crap', you think, 'I'm just gonna do me', even though 'doing you' is negative, you haven't got the tools to do the right thing, you haven't got support to know where to begin. You've got a record so the system is against you, but at the same time, the only way you feel like you can control a

little bit of the situation is to reoffend. The real sentence starts when you get released.

We could be capturing some of these issues with this method, but it's whether that information is then passed to the relevant people, or they take it forward with an action plan. These are things that potentially don't happen. For example, Booth and Harriott reflect on the lived experience of being researched and argue:²⁷

Collective and personal experiences of pain are often subjected to being used, manipulated, and repackaged — often without our direct knowledge and indeed without actual real consent — mostly leaving marginal benefit and minimal impact on the actual lives of the criminalised women themselves nor on the wider structural conditions under which we labour.

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Photovoice puts us at the centre, we decide what to share, what it means, and what changes we think need to happen. It has the potential to feed change and better services for people with convictions because it allows people to open up and express themselves, then that's a rich quality piece of work. Because the individual knows what they need: they know!

Gill: What helped us that could help others?

Natasha and Kemi: You (Gill) are in the frame of mind of working and not judging people, but not everyone is at that point, they could be unaware of their social biases. We have to have confidence in the person writing. It's so simple, it's about treating people like human beings, and then you will get respect and it builds the relationship. But it's not for everyone and that's what we've experienced in services. So, if we did this with anyone else, they potentially could have come in and seen themselves as above us. So, there's a judgement towards us as co-researchers and that can jeopardise things. The feeling of being equal needs to be there for me as a fellow co-researcher and for the people going through the process.

26. Ministry of Justice (2022). *Proven reoffending statistics: October to September 2020*. Ministry of Justice.

27. Booth, M., & Harriott, P. (2021). Service users being used: Thoughts to the research community. In I. Masson, L. Baldwin, & N. Booth (Eds), *Critical reflections on women, family, crime and justice* (pp. 199-218). Policy Press.

Researchers need to reflect and work on their conscious and unconscious biases. Some people treat us like children. If you look at the criminal justice system involving people with lived experience, it's very controlled. I've been there myself; someone takes you into the room, they tell you what to say, 'take the chewing gum out your mouth'. They put you there, you say what you've got to say, everyone fuffs around and then the organisation gets a clap. It's very controlled but that undermines our work because it devalues us, it's almost like we can't come in on a level playing field. I'm not saying every person who comes out of prison, you take what they've got to say, but we've got value, we're an organisation that's working with people for years now. But some people still treat us like we've just walked out of prison yesterday. Till we move away from this mentality we're never going to have people like us contributing and making things better, we're still going to be in the same situation.

We were 18 and 19, convicted on importing drugs, served an eight-year sentence and have all these years of service since, but society hears more negative stuff about us than positive. With reoffending rates, it's not that she doesn't want to change, or he doesn't want to change, low expectations stick with people. There may be a service set up, saying it helps people change, but in the worker's mind, there will be someone believing that these people can't change, it's almost like an instant stereotype, an automatic door up, and it's going to stop communication. The worker is thinking 'I'll give a little bit of effort because I have to, but I'm not going above and beyond because he'll be back inside next week' but why is he back inside next week? What are the other issues going on?

We also need to think about mental health. Suicide and self-harm are rife in prison and there may be childhood issues, but in prison people are lost. We were together (as sisters), we don't know what it's like to be lonely in prison because they kept us together.

Gill: This conversation is reminding me of a finding from our photovoice project; that your work is valued by people because they felt your love. And here you are saying love and care can mitigate some of the damage of prison. So, no matter how good the research method is, (e.g., photovoice), if you've not got researchers who

care for the people involved, then it you're not going to make it work?

Natasha and Kemi: It takes a unique person, and you have to want to be that. Please don't play with people. A unique person that is looking at people as a human being, is willing to learn, is listening and can take all of that and put it together, because it's not easy sometimes to explain to people if they haven't been there, but you do a lot of listening and are respectful. A lot of researchers do a lot of talking but what they don't realise is the vibe that comes off them, non-verbal communication is just as important. Not communicating in a way that feeds the stereotypes. This has to be implemented professional courses, its missing. If you don't know better, you can't do better.

Conclusion

There seems no better place to end than with a message that researchers should connect with participants and co-researchers as equal human beings, treating people with respect, and listening to them. It is a simple message, but it is also often forgotten. Research (and 'user' involvement work) can too often be extractive rather than relational. Our methods too, play a part. This article has introduced the straightforward, accessible practicality of photovoice as a method. Inviting people to frame their own worlds using visual and spoken methods can level the research field and amplify voices not always heard. It can help to overcome some of the tokenism that criminalised people can experience in 'involvement' or 'participation' projects, and it creates beautiful, powerful data. However, our main lesson from writing this piece has been the importance of relationships and care. We are friends in our work together, we care about each other and listen to each other, this has created safe, trusting relationships, which influence the feel, 'vibe' or culture that we invite our participants and co-researchers to step into. We encourage others to nurture caring relationships and environments as a healthy backdrop for the exciting task of inviting photo stories of people's lives.

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