The Framing Safety Project offers women who are or have been battered the opportunity, through photo-narratives, to explore the violence in their lives and educate others about battering through public exhibits of their photo-narratives. The project was developed by the author in conjunction with battered women’s support groups. These groups provide therapeutic support for participants, but are also a setting for “consciousness raising,” which involves participants sharing their personal experiences, learning to identify the structures of oppression that shape behavior and meaning, and using this knowledge for personal and societal change. In a typical battered women’s support group, facilitators introduce a feminist analysis, challenging the “normalcy” of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Support group settings offer a safe space for women to continually explore, challenge, and affirm their experiences. In supporting one another and sharing their stories, participants are actively engaged in transformation and empowerment. Thus, feminist support groups can be seen as sites of semi-formal public pedagogy. By adding the dimension of public exhibits, the Framing Safety Project (FSP) became a pedagogical tool for both individual transformation and community education (Ellsworth, 2005).

In creating this project, I drew from several theoretical and methodological traditions to construct a learning process that provides tools to reframe the taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world and, through critical analysis, to make change. One of the goals of the FSP was to enhance the typical support group experience by providing participants with a medium for self-exploration, expression, and reflection on the violence in their lives (interpersonal and systemic) through photography and narrative. Additional goals were to enable women to identify and value the daily work they do to survive and keep those they are responsible for (e.g., children) safe. I call these actions safekeeping strategies. An example would be keeping a coat and keys by the door in case they need to flee from the batterer. This supports the empowerment goal of allowing women to “make their own decisions, honor their own feelings, and choose their own actions” (Sharma, 2001, p. 1409). They would gain a better understanding of their lives by integrating the knowledge and insight gained from the workshop with the counseling work they are doing in support groups and individual therapy sessions. Beyond the immediate effect on participants, the FSP also aimed to educate the community about battering, available resources,
interventions, and further to add the voices of women to policy-level discussions on battering so these policies may better reflect their realities and actual needs (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996).

This chapter describes the process of creating photo-narratives with three battered women's support groups and offers examples of the ways women constructed their experiences. Participants in all three of the groups were immigrants: two groups were comprised of primarily Mexican women and the third group of women from India and Pakistan. The sample photos and accompanying narratives illustrate the ways that participants' photo-narratives concretized and contextualized their transformation process as they dealt with past or current abuse. I also explore the profound ways that planning and executing public exhibits based on the photo-narratives empowered these women and gave voice to their experiences.

Theories and Methods

Feminist and Critical Race Theory and Methodology

Like other critical methods, feminist methods and theories make problematic the assumptions about women's lives and the political, economic, and social systems and ideologies that shape our lives. Feminist researchers recognize women's subjective experience as an essential base for knowledge and political activity, and have struggled to develop methods that give voice to women's experiences without distorting or exploiting those who speak. Thus, to understand women's experiences, and hear their voices, we must start where women are located in the social, political, and economic matrices and work outward. Aiming to deconstruct rather than reify societal power hierarchies, feminist methods support research that can be used for social and political change that benefits women's lives (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988; Collins, 1990; Devault, 1999; Smith, 1987).

Feminists of color working from both feminist and critical race perspectives directed our attention to the interlocking matrices of domination and oppression that shape women's lives. Building on their work, this project focuses on exploring the variation in domestic violence shaped by a person's race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and age (Sokoloff & Pratt, 2005). For example, the tactics used by abusers, the levels of family and community support, the access or barriers to services, and the criminal justice response to abuse all might differ among Mexican immigrant women whose visa status is in their abuser's hands, a South Asian woman experiencing language barriers and cultural isolation, or an impoverished African American woman with experience of police harassment. This project assumes that no one voice, common analysis, or set of interventions will make all women safe.

Visual Methodologies

Researchers, activists, and artists increasingly are using participant-generated photography combined with interviews or narratives because this technique creates a richer account of experience than using only verbal methodologies (Capello, 2005; Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Harper, 2002). Reflecting multi-modal ways of learning, some participants find it easier to express emotions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences by combining visual and verbal forms rather than only through words (Gillies et al., 2005).

For traditionally silenced populations, including recent immigrants, this technique provides an opportunity to document their lives and share their experiences with others (Ewald, 1985; Hubbard, 1994; Leavitt, Lingafelter, & Morello, 1998). The photograph directs our gaze toward
images of their choosing. They frame what is significant in a specific setting, within their social relationships, and the environment (Ewald, 1985; Hubbard, 1994). In this way, participants give voice to their own experiential standpoints (Harding, 1986; Smith, 1987).

The Project Format

I was able to involve three support groups in the project after actively soliciting their support. The first three groups in the Framing Safety Project were sponsored by the domestic violence programs at Jane Addams Hull-House, Chicago Connections, and Apna Ghar. The groups at Jane Addams Hull-House and Chicago Connections were conducted in Spanish and were comprised primarily of Mexican immigrants. The Apna Ghar participants were primarily immigrants from South Asia living in the Chicago area. These groups were conducted mostly in English. After multiple meetings with the agencies, agreement by support group members and approval of the IRB, I began regularly attending the group meetings. At the agency’s request, the project did not replace the group meeting but augmented it—insuring that members did not temporarily lose this support structure. I drew on the group meeting structure to normalize my presence and let participants get to know me. For example, I arrived early and chatted with other participants about mundane aspects of our lives and I was invited and participated in the weekly exchange about the past week’s events. Through opening up and sharing my life, I began to form relationships with members, and in this way trust developed.

For the first two or three weeks of the project, I facilitated discussions with the group exploring what “safety” meant to them by examining the spaces they live in, their daily routines, their everyday interactions, relationships, and the feelings and emotions associated with locations, people, incidents, and periods of their lives. I asked participants, as part of their preparation for taking photographs, what they would photograph to capture a specific experience. In each session we talked about the pictures we might take to express the experiences and feelings we had over the past week. In the context of these discussions, we talked a lot about the metaphors we could use to depict our feelings, experiences, locations, and relationships.

When the members of the group decided they were ready to take photographs, I gave everyone disposable cameras. We talked about photography etiquette, safety issues, and camera operation. I asked them to photograph persons, places, and objects that represented to them the continuums between comfort and discomfort, happiness and sadness, safety and danger, security and vulnerability, serenity and anxiety, protection and exposure, strength and weakness, and love and hate.

During the next four to five weeks, participants took five to seven pictures per week. Each week women talked about the photos they took and what the photos represented to them. We also talked about the photographs they did not take and why. This was important for several reasons. First, as noted above, the project did not replace the meeting, therefore group members could participate in the discussion but choose not take photographs. One group member participated in this way out of concern for her safety. Each week she talked about the photographs she would have taken. Second, a stipulation for participating in the project was not to take risks or place yourself in any unsafe situations to take the photographs, and these survivors took that seriously. Third, sometimes a participant was simply uncomfortable taking a picture in the moment, but they wanted to. And of course, sometimes they just didn’t have the camera with them. When everyone had taken all her photographs, I had the film processed and gave each participant their photographs. During the next two to three weeks, I asked participants to choose a few photographs that best represented significant experiences, events, person(s),
place(s), or object(s) related to the violence in their lives to share with the group. Common images included photos of children, places where they had experienced violence, both in and outside their homes, safe spaces, members of the support group, photos that represented forms of violence, and methods of reclaiming the self. During this period, I reintroduced to the group the idea of having a photo-narrative exhibit. Each group embraced the idea and became directly involved in planning their exhibit. Each participant chose her photos for the exhibit, as a group they titled the exhibit and wrote an opening statement, and exhibit locations were discussed (although locations, ultimately, were determined by availability). Participants also assisted in selecting food for the opening receptions and location set up. Participating in the details of planning and organizing the event allowed women to take ownership of it.

I gave participants the choice to construct their photo-narratives in one of two ways. Some women wrote or dictated a statement about individual pictures. More commonly, I interviewed women using a method known as photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation is an interview or conversation technique where a participant’s photographs become the organizing tool for an interview (see Harper, 2002 or Pink, 2001, for a discussion of other forms of photo-elicitation using researcher photographs). Participants organized their photographs in a way that was meaningful to them. They were invited to include any additional photographs that were important to telling their stories, as well as discuss any missing photographs. Organizing the photographs involves decisions about which images to include and exclude, the sequencing of events, and the importance of an image. This method places participants in the role of expert in the interaction, as they narrate the photographs they took about their lives (Blinn & Harrist, 1991; Clark, 1999; Harper, 2002). Using transcripts from the photo-elicitation interviews, I matched text with related photos. Participants then edited the text for the photography exhibits (see Frohmann, 2005, for a detailed description of project methodology).

The photo-narrative exhibits that appeared throughout Chicago were designed to educate the community about battering by telling the stories of participants’ lives. The planning and execution process to mount the exhibit became a process that challenged and changed participants. The exhibit itself, through the participants’ stories, became a site of learning.

**Participant Photo-Narratives**

Analysis of participants’ photo-narratives reveals patterns in the experiences they talked about. These include forms of abuse (physical, emotional, verbal, psychological, economic, sexual, legal); safety strategies; socioemotional, economic, physical, and legal effects of abuse; children and family; support systems; analysis of ideologies and systems of oppression that support abuse; strategies for resistance; struggles to keep going; and reclaiming self.

The images participants chose to represent their experiences destabilize the collective representations of battered women found in public discourse (i.e., physical violence). Although the women experienced physical brutality, none of their photographs depict typical images of violence. There are no photographs of bruises, blood, or destruction. Instead, women took pictures of “ordinary,” “everyday” objects (e.g., stereos and Christmas trees), places (e.g., bathrooms, restaurants, and churches), and people (e.g., family and friends). These photographs by themselves do not overtly represent images of violence. The contrast of benign images paired with their narratives of the violence reveal how “ordinary and everyday,” yet brutal, battering is in the lives of women and children. This is what makes their photo-narratives so powerful.

I turn now to examples from the participants’ photo-narratives that appeared in the exhibits.
Keys represent control. Without being given keys to the house, there was no way I could either leave or enter the house. If he decided to take me somewhere, only then I could leave the house with him. He was always with me, watching me, controlling everything. (Viko, see Figure 39.1)

When I was nervous at home and I was scared I used to clean my house a lot. I would just clean it and scrub it so much. Then after I cleaned it I still felt it was dirty. And Clorox was so strong. I felt—I used to think that I needed to clean my floors, my dishes, everything in Clorox because that was the only thing that was going to leave everything fine—that everything was going to be ok. (Nelly, see Figure 39.2)

This picture shows the place where I felt safe. I used to take my children and I would park the car here or by the other tree. We’d spend many hours there. I felt safe because police passed by and I felt protected. I felt that my children were safe and that nothing was going to happen to them and if my husband came near the police was there as well as other people. (Maria, see Figure 39.3)

After we separated I put all the cards together that he had given me throughout the time we were together and started reading them. I realized that the cards that he had given me were always about “I’m sorry, and “It will never happen again,” and “I really love you but I don’t know what gets into me sometimes.” I just don’t like these cards any more. I feel like they are a cover up for reality. I took the picture because I threw all those cards away. (Nelly, see Figure 39.4)
This is the dining room table and I took this picture because the table is empty and I feel that although I am with my children I feel that it is empty since there is no family harmony, which I think is the most important thing. (Jenny, see Figure 39.5)

When I took the picture of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe I was thinking of how much pressure I felt for being Catholic because I was suffering domestic abuse for 19 years, thinking that divorce did not exist and that it was a sin. But I learned that it was not God who says that, but society’s pressure. (Dolores, see Figure 39.6)

Photography Exhibits as Community Education

The photo-narrative exhibits became the capstone event for each support group. Each group fleshed out the concept for their exhibit and participated in its execution. Women chose which photographs would appear in the exhibit and how much anonymity they wanted. Each group wrote an opening statement for their exhibit. The exhibits were public, community events held variously at a social service agency/community center, the Mexican Consulate, an art gallery, a convention center, a café, a conference, and the branch campus of a state university. The location of exhibits were discussed by each support group, but the final decision was made by organizational staff based on availability and cost of the location.

Each exhibit opened with a reception and community education event. While these varied in style, there were some common approaches. In each case, the sponsoring agencies publicized the exhibits by inviting other domestic violence service agencies in the area, representatives of city and state agencies that deal with violence against women, local community policing liaisons, local churches, family and friends of the participants, and local universities. The agencies sent press releases to local media, including Spanish language media (Hull-House and Chicago Connections) and South Asian media (Apna Ghar). At the exhibit openings, there was literature available with domestic violence resources in the relevant languages.

Each exhibit location offered specific additional educational opportunities. In one case, the photo exhibit was held in a multipurpose community room whose location generated additional foot-traffic and casual viewing of the exhibit by other users of the building. In another case, a non-profit gallery donated space for the exhibit for a month, generating additional viewers. One exhibit location—the Mexican Consulate—represented an extraordinary confluence of opportunities for educating particular groups, both upward toward higher officials, and outward to members of the immigrant community.
The Mexican Consulate agreed to host the Chicago Connections exhibit and used its considerable resources and influence to increase its impact. This was a political coup for the participants for several reasons. First, to have such official recognition of their situation was empowering to the women. Second, only recently in Mexico is battering perceived as a social problem. The Consulate’s hosting the exhibit constituted some recognition from the Mexican government that battering needs to be stopped. It represented a commitment to participate in domestic violence education and to increase the levels of awareness among the Mexican community.

In addition to the regular domestic violence literature, the exhibits also provided information about the provisions in the Violence Against Women Act (1994) and the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (2000) that permit immigrant women who are battered to obtain permanent resident status independent of their husbands, as well as information about the INS memorandum that permits women to file for asylum because of gender persecution. A sign posted at the end of the exhibit offered assistance from the Consulate for help with domestic violence, signaling a commitment not only to education, but also to individual help and advocacy.

The Consul General sent out invitations for the opening and invited the media. Carina, a famous and beloved radio personality from the Mexican community, was the MC. Her involvement was very important to participants because they all listened to her radio show and a few had actually called her show to talk about their abuse and ask for help. The Consul General sent out the announcement and description of the exhibit to other Consulates around the country, and the exhibit was noted in the Consul General’s report to the Mexican government.

Because of the Consulate’s support, this exhibit reached a much broader audience than it otherwise would have. The story was featured on Telemundo, one of the major Spanish-language news broadcasts. Participants were interviewed and talked about the project and their photographs, portions of the Consul General’s speech aired, and Carina spoke briefly about the unacceptability of battering. At the end of the segment, resources were provided. In addition, to increase the exhibit’s visibility, people waiting in line at the Consulate for visas and other services were taken in groups to view the exhibit. Thus, at least a thousand people viewed the exhibit over a two-month period.

Photography Exhibits and Participant Transformation

The first act of empowerment occurred when the participants embraced the exhibit and shaped its definition and execution. It became a representation of their lives. The women shaped their own stories by choosing which photo-narratives would appear in the exhibit. As part of this process, each group wrote an opening statement for their exhibit that encapsulated both their participation in the project and their purpose in mounting the photo-narrative exhibit. The statements all communicated similar sentiments. The following was the opening statement by the participants from the Chicago Connections support group:

The photographs in this exhibit show the realities of our lives: the endured violence, the company of pain, desperation, anger, frustration, and broken dreams.

We are sharing these photographs because we want people to understand the reality of living under the shadow of domestic violence and the possibility of change.

We are examples of woman’s ability to claim back our self-respect, self worth, and dignity.
We are turning our dreams into realities. We encourage all women living within a violent and an abusive relationship to join us.

After much deep consideration and discussion, all of the participants decided to have their photos included in the exhibits. This constituted a “coming out” as someone who had been/is battered. Women decided how and to what degree they would go public. The participants from two of the groups decided they wanted to have a group photograph and statement at the beginning of the exhibit, with their names or initials appearing below their photographs. They decided to place their group photograph at the beginning of the exhibit as a way to claim it as their own and personalize their stories. These were powerful decisions. In the group discussions about the exhibit and levels of anonymity, the members talked about feelings of vulnerability and shame they had about going public. We also talked about the risk to themselves of exposing the batterer to the community as someone who abuses his wife. Women decided that if he was out there abusing women, they were not going to keep silent about it; they were going to tell people what it was like being abused by him.

Participants from the third group decided to identify themselves simply as “client” to insure their safety. Members of this group were in a different situation, because they were living in a shelter or agency-sponsored housing at the time of the project and exhibit.

The majority of women from all the agencies attended their exhibit opening, a further reshaping of their public identities. Now viewers could identify and locate the participants among the crowds. They could approach them and ask questions or make comments about the exhibit or their lives. Although the participants were nervous and concerned about viewers’ negative judgments because of their abuse experiences, they were also very proud of their photo-narratives. Some participants took a risk and stood by their work, identifying themselves as the photographers, and talked with viewers as they looked at the exhibit. In addition, two women appeared on television, and others participated in a call-in show on a Spanish-language radio station about battering.

Participants’ decision-making process to go public in so many different ways reflects changes in their perceptions of self. It suggests that the work of putting on the exhibit was transformative. However, change is a fluid process that ebbs and flows. As with all personal journeys, these decisions were difficult to make, and many women were insecure about their decisions even as they attended opening night. Examples of these feelings appeared in the support group session the day before an exhibit opened as women talked about how nervous they were about the exhibit, displaying their lives out in public for all to see. At the opening reception, this same group retreated to a corner of the exhibit room, and stayed there for much of the evening. When I asked them why they were there, they told me they felt ashamed. They told me they felt that people must be looking at them and thinking how stupid they were to be living in a battering relationship. I encouraged them to listen to the responses of viewers and to read the response book. One woman sent her adult daughter to listen to people’s responses to the photographs. A few other women moved around the room listening to viewer’s remarks. They overheard viewers talking about how powerful their photographs were, how brave they thought the women were to be part of this exhibit, how much they respected the participants, and how they wanted to bring others to view the exhibit. After hearing all these comments, the women told me they felt they had made the right decision.

Participant turnout was almost 100% at all the exhibits with one exception. One woman did not attend the public event for the exhibit at the Mexican Consulate. About a week later, she called the facilitator in the middle of the night and said she was being beaten and needed to get out. She then called the police. The next day she met the facilitator at the Consulate, a familiar
landmark, to go to court and get a temporary restraining order. While the woman was waiting for the facilitator, she decided to view the exhibit. After viewing several women's photographs and reading their narratives, she got to hers. At first she didn't recognize that they were her photographs. As she studied the photographs, she realized they were hers, and that she was like everyone else in the show: she was abused. When the facilitator arrived, they talked about her reaction to the exhibit. That afternoon several women were going to be on a call-in show about domestic violence. She asked if she could participate. That day she went from a position of semi-denial about her abuse to arriving at another level of self-understanding, as she took action and saw her own experience in a larger context.

Conclusion

The Framing Safety Project is a form of public pedagogy because it assumes participants and viewers are ever changing beings—constantly learning, transforming, and reframing their worlds. For participants, creating photo-narratives was part of an exploration of their experiences living with and extricating themselves from the violence in their lives. Developing photo-narratives within the context of support groups produced stories that analyze the social construction of gender relations and power and embed those relations within the ideologies and structures of oppression that support and maintain the practice of battering. The decisions to publicly disclose their battering experiences to the community, friends, and family through exhibit participation were acts of personal transformation and social action.

Viewers of the exhibit were invited to experience aspects of battering through participant’s photo-narratives. Through participants’ representations, viewers were invited to feel the pain, joy, fear and see the struggles that battering can create. In the process of viewing the exhibit, audience participants moved between self and other as they learned about the realities of battering through participant’s lives. In learning about the lives of others, they learned about themselves. Participants’ stories challenged viewers’ conceptions of battering, gender relations, and immigration. This is a step toward identifying and critiquing the power relations and structures that legitimize and maintain this violence in society. They are encouraged to take action to stop it by talking with others about the exhibit and battering in general, passing on information to those in need, or getting involved in a domestic violence organization.

For all who participated, the Framing Safety Project, as a method of public/critical/transformational pedagogy, can be a powerful tool for personal and social change.

Notes

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