

Military Women's Rights: One Team, One Fight: Photovoice as a Therapeutic Intervention for Women Survivors in the Military

Julissa Fonseca-Medina
Albizu University, Miami Campus

Objectives/ Introduction

This literature review aims to introduce the alternative therapeutic approach of photovoice when treating women survivors of the military and address the research gap that exists when using photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory narrative method that encourages participants to use photo-taking, dialoguing, and exhibiting to process and empower participants to take control of their recovery from traumatic events and integrating the trauma into broader contexts of change (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). It is used to treat various demographics ranging from individuals with physical disabilities (Macdonald, D., Dew, A., & Boydell K. M., 2020) to the adverse experience of inner-city children (Gupta, N., Simms, E., Dougherty, A., 2019.) Across all research, photovoice has been found to develop a sense of community and having successful outcomes because it allows for providing a voice to the otherwise voiceless. When news hit about the passing of Army Specialist (Spc) Vanessa Guillen and her experience with sexual harassment, women across the country serving in the military took to social media in solidarity with her. Women shared the stories of their experiences of sexual harassment or assault, a movement which loosely mirrored the approach of photovoice. Since then, a drop in the river of change has begun with the pending legislative bill of reporting those sexual misconduct claims. To my knowledge, this is the first introduction examining the use of the photovoice methodology when treating women survivors in the military.

Methods

- Searched "Photovoice + military" on ProQuest Psychology Journals. It yielded 32 results with only one relevant to the population of my research. Understanding Barriers to Mental Health Care for Recent War Veterans Through Photovoice (Figure 1)
- Searched "Photovoice + military" on APA PsychArticles and yielded no results
- Searched "Photovoice + Women" on APA PsychArticles and yielded three results with only one relevant to the population of my research. "Waiting for the cold to end": Using photovoice as a narrative intervention for survivors of sexual assault. (Figure 2)
- Searched "photovoice + sexual assault" under the Albizu University Cobimet database and yielded 146 results and found only one relevant to my research. "See the Triumph Healing Arts Workshops for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault."

When reviewing the research that is available regarding the use of photovoice under varying databases, there appears to be little to no available research regarding the military population as well as limited research available regarding women sexual assault survivors. The research results yielded for photovoice was with the LGBTQ+ demographic, children/adolescent experiences living in rural areas, human rights across varying communities, etc.



"Seeking Numbness" by Paul.

Figure 1

Describing the picture of the fraternity house
 "... This is where I was raped, in a fraternity. Pretty cliché, I know. I blame myself for not fighting back . . . this house represents weakness. It's one of the many triggers I have, and that's a constant struggle for me..."

Figure 2 | Powerless by Sara

Results

True and colleagues (2014) report that photovoice is a useful tool for participants to convey their worldview on a topic and advocate for themselves and others (as cited by Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006.) They did a study on veterans from Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF), focusing on extending the understanding of the perspective and attitudes towards seeking and engaging in mental health. As reported by Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008, they found that up to 43% of veterans had at least one diagnosis of a mental health disorder, but less than half received treatment (Hoge et al. 2014.) True and colleagues (2014) overall wanted to generate a dialogue between veterans, organizational leadership, health service researchers, and providers to develop a design that effectively provides mental health care to veterans—highlighting one participant in their study, Harriet. Harriet was a twice deployed soldier in the United States Army Reserves. In the study, she reports fearful of reporting sexual assaults (Figure 3) to jeopardize her career development chances. She stated that there is a "code of silence" in the military that leads to treatment reluctance. That compartmentalization that occurs to separate military deployed life and non-deployed life. The result of their study found that veterans were able to project self-awareness of the boundaries that inhibit their progression to mental health recovery seeking treatment.

"Speak no evil . . ." by Harriet

Figure 3



"We had a lot of females that got raped. We had males that got raped. You're in that situation where people don't want to see, don't want to hear, don't want to speak . . . So, it's not reported. And when the soldiers come back, they're living with that. A lot of them have jobs where they could lose their job. Seeking help could be a flag in your record."

Due to the limited research available on the usage of photovoice for women survivors and my knowledge, no research has been done using photovoice for women survivors in the military; I still wanted to know the efficacy of this methodology with women survivors. Rolbiecki and her colleagues (2016) reported (as cited by Regehr et al., 2013) that cognitive and behavioral interventions do not foster posttraumatic growth (PTG) in survivors, so in the long run, they do impact the survivors' feelings of power. They also report (as cited by Schnurr et al., 2003) that group work helps increase social connection and power for female survivors of sexual assault. They conducted a study with eight college women, ages 18-34, who engaged in group discussions regarding their experiences of sexual assault. They found that the picture-taking process was a form of exposure for the participants that later helped reduce emotional reactions to the traumatic experience. Another theme they explored with their research was support and encouragement and how it allowed participants to discover the positive and negative support networks when developing posttrauma interpersonal relationships. The participants report that having gone through the process, they gained better insight into how even though their experiences are unique, they still shared how similar the trauma's effect was on each of them. It allowed for a "normalization" of the experience and helped them connect with their strengths. Lastly, the use of photovoice has significant implications when trying to make a change. Photovoice allows the participants to provide evidence of the social issue and begin the shift in policy. Murray et al. (2017) found that art-based interventions provide a voice to participants who would otherwise find it difficult to discuss their traumas. It allows for the potential to raise awareness about abuse in a community by creating an exhibit. They researched local agencies with survivors of sexual violence or partner violence. They had participants engage in several art interventions to process their trauma. Lastly, they conducted a feedback session of the workshops to gain insight into the participants' experiences (Figure 4).

"I enjoyed it. It got me in tune with how I want and deserve to feel and I'm working towards vs. how I never want to feel or my hidden emotions."

Participant feedback

Figure 4

"It helped me release some of my hurt and pain through this art. Feelings make me very uncomfortable, so have an artistic way to describe them and then people who could relate was very helpful in my personal reflections."

Conclusion

After this literature review, I found a gap in research for photovoice and how it can be implemented as an alternative to the traditional methods of treating trauma survivors. The traditional approach to treating PTSD for survivors of sexual assault embodies a cognitive (addressing negative thoughts) and behavioral (trigger exposure) therapy. CBT, as a way to reduce posttrauma symptoms. Though CBT is effective and widely used in practice, it rarely provides the opportunity for survivors to change the narrative and make meaning of their experiences, vitally important and necessary for growth and healing (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). When photovoice was first introduced, it was piloted as a narrative intervention to reduce PTSD and increase PTG among survivors of sexual assault at a midwestern university (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). After what the world witnessed with Spc Guillen, I felt like I had to research alternative interventions of providing treatment to women survivors. When I heard of photovoice and saw what women across the country to support Spc Guillen, I could not help but see the similarities between those women's efforts and the procedures and outcome of photovoice. Most of the narrative shared on social media mentioned how they were afraid to speak up similarly to how Harriet felt in the research done by True and colleagues (2015). As stated in Rolbiecki and colleagues' (2016) findings, participants said that they avoided their triggers as a way to cope with their sexual assault because it would bring about anxiety, flashbacks, and hypervigilance. However, after completing photovoice, they gained power back with being able to process it alongside the community they built and advocacy that came of it. Murry and colleagues (2017) found that photovoice has significant implications for community and policy, especially in the community. Photovoice allowed the participants to provide evidence of the social issues that are presented. Following the movement on social media after the death of Spc Guillen, the introduction of the I Am Vanessa Guillen Act, H.R. 8270, 116th Cong. (2020), was introduced to make a change to ensure security for survivors. Loosely put, the #IAMVanessaGuillen, from social media, mirrors the photovoice effects to change in a big way. Previous research states that it is successful when helping survivors process, heal, and move on. Photovoice can reassure women survivors in the military that their trauma does not mean it is time to hang up the uniform. It means they have an organization that will take care of them because it is one team, one fight.

References

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