

Understanding Barriers to Mental Health Care for Recent War Veterans Through Photovoice

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Abstract

Despite an urgent need for mental health care among U.S. service members returning from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, many veterans do not receive timely or adequate treatment. We used photovoice methods to engage veterans in identifying barriers to utilizing mental health services. Veterans described how key aspects of military culture and identity, highly adaptive during deployment, can deter help-seeking behavior and hinder recovery. Veterans' photographs highlighted how mental health symptoms and self-coping strategies operated as barriers to care. Many veterans' photos and stories revealed how negative health care encounters contributed to avoidance and abandonment of treatment; some veterans described these experiences as re-traumatizing. Visual methods can be a powerful tool for engaging recent war veterans in research. In particular, community-based participatory research approaches, which have rarely been used with veterans, hold great promise for informing effective interventions to improve access and enhance provision of patient-centered care for veterans.

Keywords

health care, access to; health care, users' experiences; lived experience; mental health and illness; participatory action research; photography / photovoice; post-traumatic stress disorder; stigma; visual methods; vulnerable populations

Photovoice is an approach to using visual data in qualitative health research, where participants' photographs and descriptions of their photographs facilitate discussion of potentially difficult or sensitive topics and provide the foundation for shared knowledge-building (Padgett, Smith, Derejko, Henwood, & Tiderington, 2013; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Photovoice methods reflect core tenets of community-based participatory research (CBPR), including a commitment to empowerment of participants and balancing research with action, and have been gaining traction as an effective means to address a variety of public health concerns (Baker & Wang, 2006; Cabassa et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2000). By stimulating dialogue, photovoice enables participants to convey their worldviews and experiences to multiple audiences and to advocate for themselves and others in their community (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006). The increasing inclusion of photovoice and other visual-narrative research methods in health research stems from an appreciation of how subjective views and experiences shape people's conceptions of health and impact their treatment-seeking behaviors (Rigg, Cook, & Murphy, 2014).

In this article, we report on findings from a photovoice project with veterans who served in Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF), with

a focus on extending current understandings of veterans' perspectives and attitudes toward seeking and engaging in mental health care. Our research objectives were to use photovoice methods to (a) further explore barriers to mental health care identified in previous studies that used more traditional quantitative research methods and (b) generate suggestions for improving patient-centered post-deployment care that are informed by real-world experiences of veterans.

This work is part of a larger CBPR study, in which we collaborated with a group of OEF-OIF veterans to help them communicate their experiences and views to health care providers and policymakers around four broad issues: the impact of military service and deployment on health, challenges in making the transition home after deployment, facilitators and impediments to

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