



# Photovoice: Expanding the Modern Ombuds' Toolkit to Provide Impactful Upward Feedback about Systemic Challenges Regarding DEIB

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## ABSTRACT

Ombuds offices provide confidential conflict management spaces. When seeking to foster DEIB and address related conflicts in higher education, methods of engagement for Ombuds offices can require creativity beyond the standard Ombuds toolkit. This article shares the methodology behind, and insights derived from, an intervention aimed at understanding the experiences of Black female academics to provide upward organizational feedback, help minimize attrition, and strengthen recruitment at Georgia State University (GSU). We employed Photovoice, a photo- and dialogue-based participatory action research methodology, to learn about the realities of being a Black female scholar at GSU. Concurrently, we strived to create a community for mentorship and camaraderie by creating a hospitable environment for participants to convene and express themselves creatively.

The participants met weekly to discuss their photos documenting their experiences as a starting point for dialogue, reflection, and problem-solving. Together, we developed recommendations for GSU's leaders regarding opportunities for enhancing DEIB at the university.

## KEYWORDS

Ombuds, Higher Education, Photovoice, DEIB, systemic challenges, upward feedback

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As Ombuds, we work to assist a diverse set of stakeholders in the management and resolution of a variety of conflicts and concerns. We do so both by engaging individuals and groups to address internal and interpersonal conflicts and by providing upward feedback within the organization to bring systemic challenges to the attention of leadership, thus supporting the development of a positive campus climate (International Ombuds Association [IOA], n.d.). As such, our roles are designed to address all three bases of social conflict – the internal, interpersonal, and structural (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012).

The Comprehensive Conflict Engagement Model (CCEM) posits that for conflict interventions to have long-term sustainable and systemic benefit, they need to target all three bases of social conflict, be transportable out of the immediate conflict management space, and be sustained through long-term engagement (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012; Mayer, 2012; Reimers, 2015, 2016). As permanent employees of organizations, rather than parachuted-in consultants facilitating isolated small-group dialogue processes, organizational Ombuds are uniquely positioned to engage long-term, consistent with the CCEM.

One practical tool that meets the requirements put forth in the CCEM is Photovoice (Reimers, 2015; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice (PV) is a photo- and dialogue-based participatory action research methodology that comes out of the Public Health sector and has been used successfully in a variety of fields to raise awareness of marginalized groups' concerns and needs (Agloinga, 2021; Garraway, 2021; Phelps-Ward 2022; Torres, 2021). It has also been shown to be effective as a form of small-group dialogue process that promotes the development of supportive relationships among project participants. Compared to traditional small-group dialogue processes, however, it has the added benefit of creating tangible artifacts (captioned images) that can be transported out of the immediate project space and shared with external stakeholders and the broader community, thereby expanding its reach (Reimers, 2015, 2016).

Our “Lift Every Voice: Photography and Dialogue for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging” (LEV) project conducted at Georgia State University (GSU) was born out of the socio-historical context of the events that had unfolded in 2020. The year 2020 brought a host of challenges and highlighted the dual pandemics that Black academics faced: Racism, especially in the form of police brutality, and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Black community (Spinner, 2021). As institutions of higher education scrambled to address the turmoil and meet the pressing needs of their communities, it became evident that addressing these inequities and tensions while promoting progress and justice would require a greater understanding of this unique time and its effects on the affected communities, as well as efforts to create camaraderie and self-advocacy.

The project served a four-fold purpose: 1) Collecting data on Black scholars' experiences and challenges at GSU in the interest of providing upward feedback and improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) on campus; 2) Providing a safe space for mentoring, self-expression, and community-building; 3) Exploring the use and utility of the PV methodology as a creative addition to the Ombuds toolkit; and 4) Exploring the effectiveness of a virtual modality for DEIB and conflict management purposes. We sought to evaluate PV in this context as a tool for increasing DEIB practices, building authentic relationships, and encouraging academic community members at GSU to express themselves. We also aspired to inspire other Ombuds offices (OOs) to utilize this method and expand the list of Ombuds tools.

The PV project consisted of Black female<sup>1</sup> faculty members and doctoral students as we sought to enhance the experiences of those in faculty positions and those most likely to pursue positions in the faculty. Ultimately, we aimed to recommend measures to GSU administrators that would

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<sup>1</sup> The project was open to all genders but resulted in an all-female participant group.



help recruit, retain, support, and promote Black academics into the professoriate to create a more diverse faculty body.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the experience, our participants found mentorship, sisterhood, and new ways to express themselves. The project's positive results indicated the utility of the photography and dialogue combination while participating in the safety and confidentiality of an OO. Together we were able to co-create and share recommendations for institutional improvements. This article also details how other OOs may replicate and adapt the PV tool based on their institutional context and needs.

## CONTEXT

Ombuds offices provide safe and confidential spaces where visitors can share their experiences and determine ways to manage conflicts informally (Hollis, 2021). In doing so, Ombuds serve "to establish a more equitable, respectful, and inclusive climate (...) for all" (Burton & Mershon, 2021, p. 24). At times, the methods of engagement for OOs require creativity in addition to the staple services (Howard, 2020). This is compounded by the fact that few texts examine social justice and equity issues in ways that are applicable to daily practice; instead, they tend to be theoretical and abstract (Dugan, 2017; Kezar & Posselt, 2019; Theoharis, 2007).

As evidenced in a series of virtual events hosted/sponsored by the IOA, there has been a growing interest among the Ombuds community in proactively addressing social justice and equity issues in their organizations. The two most recent examples thereof are the IOA-sponsored "National Equity Project Workshop Series for Ombuds: Implicit Bias, Microaggressions & Structural Racism" in January/February 2024; and the IOA's 2023 September Symposium titled "Ombuds as Change Agents: Ombuds Intersections in the Modern World," which invited Ombuds to explore the intersections of DEIB and trauma in Ombuds practice (IOA, 2023a; 2023b).<sup>3</sup> In keeping with this emerging expansion within the field, this project was designed to explore and elevate a new Ombuds tool for revealing and amplifying the social justice and equity issues on campus that impact the experiences of marginalized groups and their trajectory for success.

Black scholars' experiences in academia have been particularly challenging across time and space as they have faced historical marginalization and poor treatment (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005). Previous research on Black academics in higher education has focused on campus racial climate and imposter syndrome (Solórzano et al., 2000; Miller, 2021) as well as identity and/or representation (Branch, 2021; Miller, 2021). Recent research on Black males found that positive collegial influences consisted of cultural representation and support, community, awareness of resources, and engagement opportunities (Ortega, 2021). Meanwhile, Black women frequently contested how they were represented in the media and higher education (Branch, 2021), which affected their experiences and ability to focus on scholarship.

At GSU, a Predominantly Black Institution, Black-identifying academics have encompassed a large number of visitors to the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOO). Among all minority ethnic groups on campus, the overall number of Black OOO visitors exceeded all other minority groups with over 100 Black visitors in 2019-20 and 100 Black visitors in 2020-21 (Reimers, 2021). All other minority ethnic groups combined encompassed less than 75 visitors from 2019-20 and less than 100 visitors in 2020-21 (Reimers, 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> In 2022, 13.8% of full-time teaching faculty at GSU were Black (Navarra et al., 2023).

<sup>3</sup> In June 2023, this project and the Photovoice methodology were introduced to Ombuds colleagues at Kennesaw State University's Center for Conflict Management Summer Institute. The attendees of the workshop "Special Tools for Ombuds to Use in Their Careers: Providing Upward Feedback & Fostering DEIB through Photovoice" (Reimers) were intrigued by this new tool and envisioned a range of applications within their own organizations.

Many of the concerns shared by these visitors are reflected in the studies employed by the university to address DEIB on campus. For example, in 2017, a commission within the university engaged faculty focus groups to identify several themes regarding issues and possibilities for improving DEI<sup>4</sup>. These themes included: “a call to purpose working with diverse student populations, the power of mentoring and learning relationships, building a more complete commitment to diversity and inclusion, [...] fear and mistrust of University Administration” (Walker & Rosen, 2019, p. 40). Another theme that emerged from the data was that Black faculty felt that they carried the load and burden of the university’s pledge to diversity. They experienced this commitment to diversity as taxing on their identities and roles at GSU and they observed a “disconnect between their White colleagues and Black students” (Walker & Rosen, 2019, p.42).

The commission made several recommendations, including: “1) Make faculty diversity and engagement a visible priority coming from the President and senior leadership, and infuse the commitment throughout the university with urgency to act and the resources to support it; and 2) Invest resources into deepening the sense of community and engagement for all faculty, and celebrate the diversity of GSU’s people, programs, and campus cultures” (Walker & Rosen, 2019, p. 2). To further these efforts, GSU commissioned the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) to gauge job satisfaction and DEIB issues. The results, released in 2020, discovered that some of the greatest challenges for faculty of color at GSU were compensation below market, lack of research support, diversity, and workload. Similarly, the GSU Task Force for Racial Equality, created in response to the racist police violence and social unrest of 2020, found a lack of faculty diversity and trust, as well as white apathy to be weaknesses in the institution that impeded the progress towards racial equity on campus (Gayles, 2020).

The complex nature of the challenges faced by Black academics lends itself to creative engagement. Photovoice engages participants in a unique form of self-advocacy that is mutually beneficial for project participants and external stakeholders alike. The PV project incorporated several of the recommendations initiated by the GSU commission by creating a safe space for mentoring and voicing concerns, amplifying underrepresented voices, fostering a sense of community and engagement for Black faculty, and making DEIB a visible priority supported by senior leadership. In pursuit of continued coordinated and collaborative efforts, we acquired the endorsement and support of the provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, thus creating a direct pipeline for upward feedback to the University’s Administration.

## PHOTOVOICE AS A RESEARCH TOOL

Photovoice, a photography- and dialogue-based participatory action research methodology, allows participants to surface the positive as well as challenging qualities of their communities to external stakeholders (Wang & Burris, 1997). PV is designed to empower those whose voices regarding important community matters often go unheard. Influenced by Paulo Freire’s concept of critical consciousness (1970), PV promotes a more meaningful understanding of how the world works through the sharing and consideration of captioned visual images taken from someone else’s perspective (Wang, 1997). It is known for being inclusive of diverse abilities and backgrounds and for attesting to the diverse outlooks of vulnerable populations (Wang, 1997).

Several PV projects have explored minoritized women’s perceptions of exposure to race-based injustices and their coping strategies. One project highlighted that adult Black women lack coping strategies to heal from any racial injustice they witnessed (Torres, 2021). In a project with

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<sup>4</sup> While our study addressed “DEIB,” at times “DEI” is used in reference to other studies or documents that did not incorporate “belonging.”



Indigenous women, PV was used to identify protective factors provided by cultural practices that support resiliency (Agloinga, 2021). In a study on well-being and resistance, Phelps-Ward (2022) discovered sites of oppression that posed barriers to the well-being of graduate students of color and their methods of resistance. Garraway's (2021) study on Black female doctoral students found several links to their persistence including ancestral ties, sense of self, and advice. These projects have demonstrated PV's effectiveness in amplifying and addressing the concerns of historically excluded populations while discovering new ways to support them. Our project aims to further the PV applications beyond research. In this study, we demonstrate its use as an Ombuds tool for conflict management.

## METHODOLOGY

The first step in every Photovoice project is an initial training in visual storytelling through photography, upon which participants are given the first two assignments as prescribed by the methodology – the identification of 1) positive or supportive aspects and 2) negative or challenging factors of their experience (Wang, 1997). PV encourages the participants to collaborate in designing questions that are meaningful for the group. Therefore, the participants co-developed their subsequent assignments to further explore and document their academic lives at GSU. Captioned photographs were used as the starting points for dialogue and as artifacts that could be shared outside of the project space to provide upward feedback to the administration about raised needs and concerns (Reimers, 2016).

Each session was guided by a session protocol and the participants formed connections with each other meeting virtually via WebEx to discuss these images and reflect on their experiences. This process occurred four times with participants completing post-session questionnaires gauging their feelings of belonging within the group (Knehta et al., 2020). After the final session, participants completed a post-project questionnaire based on established PV debriefing questions to gather information about their experiences with the project and methodology (Kenney, 2009; Novak, 2010; Wang, 2006).

## RECRUITMENT

Intended to understand the experiences of Black academics at GSU, participants in the study were limited to Black-identifying faculty members, post-doctoral scholars, and doctoral students as this population was either a part of the professoriate or likely to transcend into the professoriate eventually. Best practices in PV suggest that a group size of seven to ten participants is ideal as it allows for meaningful discussion as well as a manageable amount of data (Kenney, 2009; Wang, 2006). Since PV projects are quite demanding of people's time and efforts, attrition over the course of a project is to be expected (Kenney, 2009). Aiming for 15 participants would help offset the inevitable attrition. These 15 were sampled across various disciplines, departments, and roles at GSU. The criteria for participation included 1) identifying as Black/African American, 2) being over 18 years old, 3) a faculty member, postdoctoral researcher, or doctoral student, and 4) owning a camera or camera phone.

The semester prior, we discussed the idea amongst our personal campus networks to generate interest. We leveraged these networks by engaging in snowball sampling and sharing the call for participants with them and their colleagues. We also shared a recruitment flyer and emails with over 30 graduate student associations, every college department chair, faculty and student affinity groups, and cultural centers.

Prospective participants were asked to complete an initial intake form where we collected the demographic and contact information for 20 individuals. The intake form gathered information



regarding gender, roles, campus location, college/department location, year of arrival at GSU, whether they operated remotely, in-person, or hybrid, and their preferred mode of participation in the study (remotely, in-person, or hybrid). We also confirmed our required criteria.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

During its inception, we intended the project to encompass all genders and scholarly levels—doctoral, postdoctoral, and faculty. While the original interest intake included three males, scheduling conflicts resulted in an all-female participant group. It convened scholars from diverse origins who may not have met otherwise. Our participants' tenures at GSU ranged from 1.5 to 25 years and the women represented the Colleges of Education, Nursing, Arts and Sciences, Business, and Public Health. The group consisted of three graduate students and initially four (eventually three) faculty members, two of whom held higher administrative titles. One student worked as a staff member, and another held a faculty position at another college.

## TRAINING

All prospective participants were invited to a virtual information session that explored the purpose and logistics of the project. Prior to arranging the session, we emailed a Doodle poll to all who had indicated an interest in project participation to find a practical time. After discussing the risks, benefits, and expectations involved with the project, we allotted time for questions and a discussion of the time commitment and proposed meeting time. The informed consent form and a copy of the presentation were sent to everyone who attended or expressed continued interest.

During the session, we sought to get to know the prospective participants by having them introduce themselves, describe their time at GSU, their motivations for joining the project, and a fact that others would not know about them. After introductions, we discussed the four purposes of the study to ensure that their goals aligned with ours and promote transparency. Next, we covered basic photography skills such as the impact of zooming in on photography subjects versus using a wide-angle, creative framing within the photo, communicating feelings and ideas through abstract portrayals, changing the focus of the image, creating perspectives, the rule of thirds, lighting, and using camera flash. The next portion of training was devoted to photography ethics and safety. We discussed the legal issues of where to take photos, when to seek permission, and the difference between legal and ethical photography. For example, participants were advised not to take pictures of people engaging in illicit activities, leave their typical daily environment/home territory, nor enter any dangerous situations to take pictures (Kenney, 2009; Wang, 2006; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). We also cautioned against the staging of photos, the stereotyping of image subjects, and unfair portrayals through images, further demonstrating how photos can harm both participants and subjects (Kenney, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

In discussing the risks with participants, we explained that they were minimal but included potential discomfort in asking strangers to have their photo taken, discomfort in explaining the assignment, and disagreement with other participants. Participants in the group could include people whom they knew personally and with whom they may not have felt comfortable sharing everything. It was made clear that all contributions were voluntary and that they could share additional thoughts with us in private. No monetary compensation was offered, and participants retained all rights to their photos.

Upon conclusion of the training, the participants were emailed photography consent forms for their photo subjects and the photo release form that we had co-created with the University's legal counsel. These forms allowed us to consensually post their photos on the website we created for



this project and any future exhibitions while also providing the choice of anonymity. Finally, participants were instructed on how to create a profile for the PV website, how to upload and caption their photos, and were then given the first prompt.

## THE WEBSITE

Building a website dedicated to this specific project was essential for sharing and exchanging thoughts on photos, community building, and privacy. The website could be accessed by invitation only and required participants to create a profile. Each week, they uploaded their photos into the new assignment portal. During the uploading process, participants were asked to mark which photo was considered their “number one” photo and to upload a caption and title for each photo. The purpose of identifying their number one photo was to ensure that during the subsequent discussion session, everybody - at a minimum - got to go into depth about the image they felt most strongly about each week. The assignment portal generated a wall of images and captions that contained space for commenting on each other's submissions. From the management side, the site allowed us to designate the number of allowed photos, download all images, set image submission deadlines, and make authorized edits in case the participants experienced any difficulties doing so themselves. At times, these challenges involved the uploading and rotation of images or the editing of captions. The website has also served as a digital archive that the group can revisit when making plans to showcase and discuss the project.

## ADAPTING TO THE PANDEMIC

The core practices and prompts of this Photovoice project followed the original PV process; however, adaptations were necessary given the precarious times amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Operating within this new reality, we sought to accommodate our participants and their health needs and comfort levels. Therefore, we offered the option of a hybrid project in which participants could either convene in our conference room on campus or attend the sessions virtually. In the initial intake survey, we asked prospective participants to indicate their preferred mode of participation. While only two of our final participants had initially specified a preference for remote engagement, in the end all of them chose to participate 100% remotely. Consequently, we operated all meetings through the online platform WebEx and any scheduling through Doodle poll or direct emails. Additionally, while past PV projects employed digital or disposable cameras, participants in our study used their easily accessible personal cell phones. The remote format enabled us to quickly distribute the post-session questionnaires at the end of the meetings via email and allowed our busy participants to complete them at their leisure.

## ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The data collected and analyzed in this PV project included: the captioned images provided by the participants, their group discussions thereof, the post-session surveys, and the final post-project survey. Each data type was analyzed separately. However, all data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to identify the themes that inductively emerged. First, we individually took notes on what was being addressed in each captioned image. Then we compared and combined our respective notes to create a set of themes that embodied what the participants were expressing in response to each prompt, coding the captioned images and counting the frequency of occurrence. Theme examples include Inspirational Artifacts, Loss of Camaraderie, Seeking Community/Comfortable Spaces, and Showing Love. During each session, the participants provided feedback on the presented themes and their accuracy and shared their interpretations of the images.

We used the same inductive approach and constant comparative method to analyze the survey responses, grouping them by the sentiments that were being expressed and identifying frequencies. These data provided insight into how the participants were feeling over the course of



the project and upon its completion (for details, see “Outcomes” section). Using Google Documents provided a simple way to analyze the survey data as the platform automatically loads them into an Excel spreadsheet and provides circle graphs, which facilitate comparison. In tracking the responses to each question over the course of the project, we were able to view and denote where changes in opinions, experiences, or emotions occurred (for details, see “Outcomes” section).

SESSIONS

With every photo prompt, we requested that participants submit three photos capturing resources, offices, specific people, organizations, as well as images representative of attitudes, emotions, and the like. While the prompt for each session changed, the format remained the same. First, we checked-in with everyone and inquired how they were doing before moving into the first round, during which the participants were given one minute of uninterrupted time to discuss their favorite photo (their own “number one”) with the group. With a time constraint of only two hours allotted per session, giving participants this dedicated attention ensured that airtime was shared, and everyone’s voice was heard. Next, we presented the participants with the themes that we had identified while reviewing that week’s photo submissions. Following the SHOWeD guiding questions (Wang et al., 2004) (see Appendix A), we facilitated a conversation about the themes and whether they were perceived as accurate or relatable, which they were consistently found to be. Reflecting both on the themes as well as the individual images of which they were comprised, the participants shared their thoughts on the photographs at face value – what they depicted, and the stylistic elements employed by the photographers – as well as the deeper messages conveyed by the captioned images. Next, we presented the prompt for the following session, reviewed logistics, and addressed lingering questions before closing and sending out the post-session survey.

Session One aimed to start off the participants in a positive way and to learn about supportive structures already in place that could possibly be built-upon later. Session Two explored the opposite by asking the participants to identify challenging aspects of their campus experience. During Sessions Two and Three, the group co-developed the prompts for Sessions Three and Four (see table 1). This customization ensured that the project stayed relevant and useful for them.

Table 1

Session Prompts

Session	Prompt
1	What supportive aspects of the campus community have a positive influence on your experience at GSU?
2	What challenging aspects of the campus community have a negative influence on your experience at GSU?
3	What are the things we won’t/can’t say? 1) Things we cannot say as women 2) Personal and professional things 3) What is not safe to say? How has this process (the degree, academic position, etc.) changed our lives in ways that we are not too comfortable saying out loud?
4	What brings us peace or pleasure inside or outside of the academic space? What gives us hope and keeps us going?



After the sessions concluded, we gathered virtually once more for a debriefing and planning session. This was an opportunity to reflect on the PV process, examine the contents of our previous discussions, express lingering thoughts, and create a plan for addressing the presented issues and opportunities.

## **SURVEYS**

Following each session, participants received a survey with a range of 15-21 questions (see Appendix B). The surveys saw a response rate of 50-70%. The questions consisted of open-ended and five-point Likert-scale questions indicating levels of agreement and disagreement regarding the themes of connections, commitment, DEIB, and general facilitation feedback. Survey respondents could opt to use their real names or a code name/identifier. This enabled us to track individual responses and progress. The surveys were minimally altered each week to reflect the current needs and inquiries of the project. For example, when attendance and involvement concerns arose, we added questions related to the group's commitment levels. These questions allowed us to evaluate whether their perceived commitment to the project would affect the overall outcome and benefits experienced in the project.

In assessing the DEIB quality of the project, we inquired if they had sufficient opportunities to share each week, whether they perceived others as having those same opportunities, if they felt the project was a space where they could express themselves freely and felt supported or discriminated against in any way. In general, we asked how we could improve their commitment or improve their experience within the group. The final post-project survey (see Appendix C) asked about their motivations and effort, perceived impact of the project, their thoughts on the efficacy of remote participation, and any final thoughts.

## **OUTCOMES**

The participants' weekly submissions and the lively discussions they triggered provided rich insight into their lives and how these were affected by their academic careers. Since the participants opted to, in the third and fourth sessions, explore more deeply the challenges and hopes that they had started identifying in the first and second sessions, there was considerable overlap between those sessions. Therefore, this section will highlight the overarching topics and ideas, organized by data type rather than session (see table 2). Additionally, we highlight some of the essential images and dialogue that revealed the interconnectedness of their experiences as well as how different aspects of the PV methodology facilitated the group dynamics and turning points.

**Table 2**  
*Overarching Topics/Ideas by Data Type*

Data Type	Overarching Topics/Ideas
Captioned images and discussion	The good, the joyful, and hope: Inspirational artifacts and messaging, roots/pride, camaraderie/solidarity, restorative self-centering, creativity, nature, love, faith
	The bad, the ugly, the unspeakable: Isolation, lack of support and safe spaces, work-life (im)balance, pressure to assimilate, low pay
Post-Session and Post-Project Surveys	Relationship-building within the group, belongingness and connection, connection over time, feeling valued, expression, identity support

## **CAPTIONED IMAGES AND DISCUSSION**

### **THE GOOD, THE JOYFUL, AND HOPE**

The participants identified inspirational artifacts and messaging, connectedness to their roots and pride in their heritage and accomplishments, camaraderie and solidarity, restorative self-centering practices, creativity, and connectedness to nature, love, and faith as sources of joy and strength in their work lives.

Figure 1 depicts one of the participants' images in which she captured her desk artifacts including a photo of her son, a gratitude jar, and an heirloom that inspired her to remember both her roots and future.

Figure 1 Gratitude



Caption. This picture shows my gratitude jar which sits on a table given to me by my great grandfather who only had an 8th grade education. This is a support to me because it reminds me to remain thankful for where I am and how I got here. Pictures of my son also occupy this space which is fitting as I'm most grateful for him in my life.

The participant noted: "I feel a great sense of joy to come into my office and to have that treasure for me, that I can be in [this] space that my great grandfather probably never would've imagined for himself, but I'm sure he dreamed for us." Her appreciation of these artifacts, her family, and its history resonated with the other women. One commented on her photo of Black art in her office: "I just wanted to pay homage to Black art and Black artists in a different way. So I've hung them in my office." Another commented how "We all have the skills to go other places and we'll make a lot more money [...], but we make the choice every day to be of service. And [...] you sometimes need reminders about why you're doing that. So, these things are just material ways to look at that."

A rich discussion on pride centered not only around the women's academic and professional accomplishments, but also around clothing and hairstyles that are often deemed unprofessional or inappropriate for the workplace. One woman mentioned regarding Black hair: "However you wear it, it's become a political statement." Another responded: "Black women deserve to be in spaces that are elevated. Their voices deserve to be elevated. They deserve to be bold and beautiful and bald-headed if they want to be." The other women agreed and appreciated feeling seen by the others.

The participants highlighted the need for and expression of camaraderie and solidarity by displaying symbols thereof in their offices (e.g. human rights stickers on their doors, gifted canvases, and Black art). They also discussed the need for and participation in affinity groups. Speaking to the importance of allies, solidarity, and safe spaces in academia, one participant stated: "This is how we stay well, this is how we stay in the work. Being able to be in these spaces where we could speak freely..." Figure 2 depicts another participants' appreciation for the graduate student write-in, a resource provided by the university, which aids in the academic and personal success of students. These symbols and resources speak to the desire to feel seen and supported on campus.

Figure 2 Write-In



Caption. The Graduate Student Write-In helped me convert this world of post-it notes into tangible written thoughts I could share with others. It gave me the space and inspiration to keep moving forward with my dissertation. It provided a wonderful quiet space during Spring Break to make progress. And in a dissertation every word forward counts. And they provided snacks, including on the last day cake, which never hurts.

When examining sources of peace, pleasure, and hope, the participants discussed restorative self-centering through creative passions and resonated with the many ways they enjoyed showing and receiving love from others. Figure 3 shows one participant's photo of her journaling in nature, wearing an ethnic pride shirt, which resonated with the group. Others included nature-based images and expressed similar sentiments of desiring more time in the outdoors as well as more time to decelerate in life and absorb the world around them in more meaningful ways that academia does not always provide.

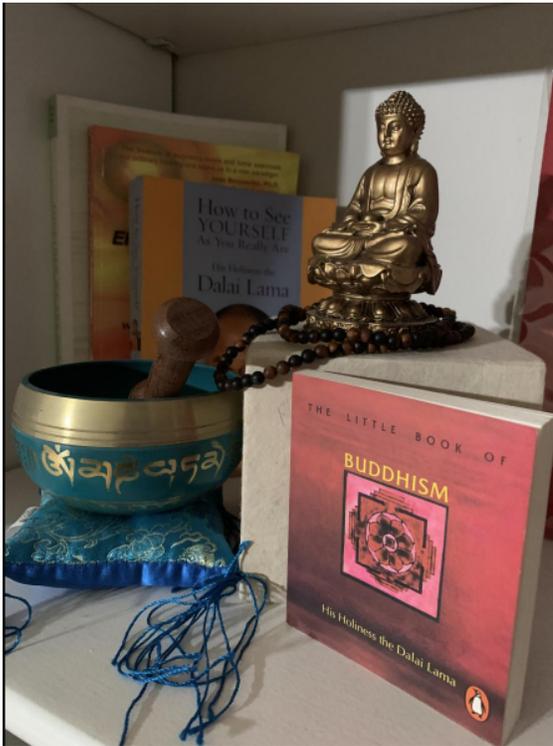
Figure 3 Black and Blessed



Caption. Journaling in nature: I'm at peace in my favorite nature space, sitting by the Chattahoochee River. I call it the sanctuary. I love journaling (my life writing). I'm wearing my favorite color. The message on my sweatshirt says it all!

Finally, the group discussed the role of faith, whether through religion, faith in others, or faith in themselves. One participant shared how, "even though I'm not a practicing Buddhist, I have two very big pictures of Buddha [...] because they bring me so much joy and [...] because [...] it's about love, love of humanity, and love itself" (also see Figure 4, submitted by a different participant). One group member remarked how "We're all very different, but we're all very same at the core of what brings us love, what brings us joy, what brings us peace, and it's beautiful to see that as we [...] come together."

Figure 4 Been Seeing Ya'



Caption. The Buddha, singing bowl and the rosary (mala) are all gifts from a former GRA who traveled to China in 2019. It is meaningful because while we never spoke about religion, she understood enough of my commitment to my spiritual practice to select gifts that she thought would be meaningful to me.

I have another very large Buddha and scented candles from the Karma brand that were gifted by a few former students - along with a photo album of times we spent together. Given that they identified as strong Christians, it's their intention, thoughtfulness, and respect for my own identity that I appreciate. It's nice to be seen.

Sometimes not only what is said, but also what is not said can make a statement in these group dialogues. It stood out that, when the participants were asked to identify positive and supportive factors affecting their academic experiences, almost half of them were self-generated rather than provided externally and/or structurally, through the university. This may be reflective of the resilience and extra psycho-emotional labor Black female professionals often must perform in academic and other workplaces to self-sustain and succeed (Griffin, 2020; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2011).

#### THE BAD, THE UGLY, THE UNSPEAKABLE

When asked to identify challenging aspects that negatively influenced their experiences and things they felt could not be discussed openly outside of the group for personal and professional reasons, the participants shared images related to isolation, lack of support and safe spaces, work-life (im)balance (see Figure 5), the pressure to assimilate and acquiesce in academia, and low pay.

Figure 5 Work-Life Balance



Caption. More guidance and spaces should be given to work life-balance that addresses being a graduate student and what awaits in the transition to academic. Beyond basic conversations of meditation, exercise, and sleep, more discussions need to address what it means to function as an academic teaching marginalized subjects and stigmas attached to working with marginalized students.

While identifying causes for their experience of disconnection and isolation, one of the participants pointed out that “no one talks about the amount of change and sacrifice required [to pursue an academic career...], you may have to separate from people that you love because you cannot get things done [...] around them or they do not understand the minutia [involved in] going through this process” (see Figure 6). Another remarked how “Going into a PhD, a lot of people have said that you’re very strong, so you can handle it. But people don’t check on the strong people.” This discussion highlighted the struggle and sacrifices involved with, in many cases, being first-generation college and/or graduate students, charting a new course for themselves and their families.

Figure 6 Life Storage



Caption. I had a number of life changes happen during the last few weeks. One of them was relocation into the city and moving in with a life partner. No one talks about this life stuff and what it looks like when you are a BIPOC PhD. I may be going about asking the questions wrong and the ones I have heard seemed like horror stories. So I ran over to my storage unit to capture this image.

It represents time, space, money, and sacrifice of what I am trying to do to make the last part of my studies work. I feel like I packed away my frustrations and worries in that unit so that I can focus as well.

The participants also discussed the loss of camaraderie due to remote work arrangements and “The Great Resignation” (Vinson, 2022) caused by the pandemic. Figure 7 depicts “The Great Resignation” metaphorically and explores how academia has driven out not only friends but also foes. Pointing out a silver lining, the participant commented: “One of the blessings of the pandemic was the ability to work from home and to no longer be subjected to microaggressions and macroaggressions. It’s disappointing when you lose colleagues that you work with, but somehow it can be a blessing. Sometimes that’s what the Great Resignation brings you, your bullies go work someplace else.”

Figure 7 A Quit-Able Place



Caption. “We can’t talk about ... the Great Resignation... no. no. no”  
As colleagues move on, the workload gets heavier. As institutional knowledge is lost, the work becomes harder.  
Unless they were bullies, of course.

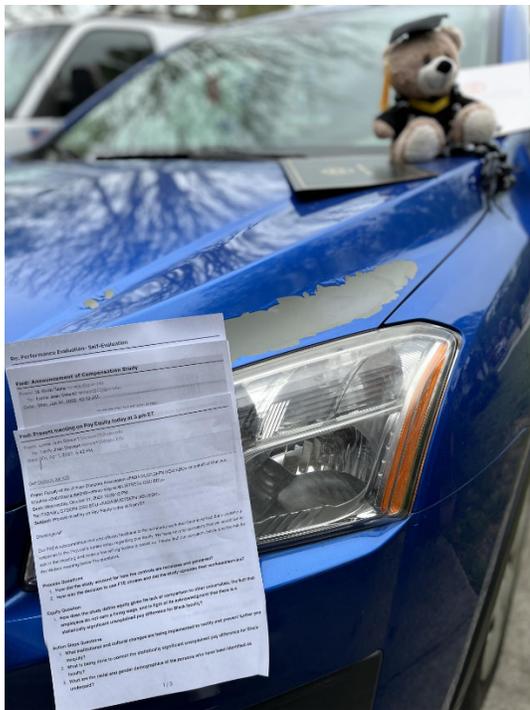
Discussing their lack of free time for their passions due to being overworked, the group agreed that the demanding workload often felt meaningless and unsustainable, resulting in burnout as it did not center their desires and goals. One participant noted how, “if we say no, we’re not team players, we’re not disciplined.” Many agreed with this sentiment and shared the feeling of being unable to turn down work due to the expectations or repercussions that could follow. One participant resolved: “I’m going to give myself more grace when I have to show up in spaces as something different than what the space requires, because I’m there, I’m present, and this is just how it has to be in that moment.” This moment represented a turning point where the women felt empowered to reject the expectations that many of them felt regarding having to take on a large workload graciously.

Addressing systemic challenges in academia, one participant described how, despite claims of embracing diversity, the lived realities are constricting and only allow for one way of being in academia: “The reality is that there’s some structures in place that make it such that there’s only one way.” Another participant addressed how her passions in pedagogy led to repercussions: “I’m marginalized in academia, not just by how I look, but what I teach. I teach black feminist thought...” This was juxtaposed by another noting how “Professionalism is code for white male professionalism.” The participants discussed the idea of self-preservation through acquiescence to university demands. This included giving up Afrocentric styles of dress to avoid seeming political and giving up passion projects or incorporating texts that are more mainstream to satisfy the non-marginalized population. Several participants expressed a desire to be who they are in the academic space without having to think about what messages they could be conveying (unintentionally), in the same way that Caucasians have the luxury of being able to exist. This dissatisfaction with the Europeanization of the curriculum and professional standards was shared

by many who agreed that the academic hierarchy and power dynamics were “almost like a zeal towards putting people in their place.” In juxtaposition, a participant, who held dual roles as faculty and administrator, gave this advice based on her own experience: “This academy, to me, isn’t the most important thing. I know people for whom their identity as academics, and as PhDs, and as scholars is the leading force in their lives and their lives center around that identity.” In her opinion, rising to leadership did not require the surrender of every identity, but did require balance and boundaries.

Finally, as illustrated in Figure 8, the group members were united in their frustration with their inability to afford and maintain their lifestyles due to insufficient, below-market compensation. This echoed a concern shared widely by many GSU employees, transcending race and gender (Gayles, 2020). Thus, while many of the positive and supportive elements discussed had been internal and/or self-generated, most of the challenging factors of the participants’ experiences in their academic careers were externally imposed and/or structural in nature.

Figure 8 Does Love = No \$?



Caption. I graduated with a terminal degree and a sub-degree in education. Yet the car I can't afford to replace does not reflect the value I add to the University. My employee evaluations are good and I am exultant! But the embarrassing pay may force me out...

Many of the participants noted how emotionally challenging it had been to reflect and express their thoughts and experiences, albeit in a safe place. One participant remarked how, in the third session, she felt she had gone “through the ringer.” Considering that the third assignment was co-created by the project participants themselves, this is indicative of the participants’ vulnerability, courage, tenacity, and willingness to endure discomfort in pursuit of greater DEIB on campus. It is also indicative of the trust extended towards and responsibility placed upon the facilitators to treat and elevate the garnered insights with the necessary discretion, care, and respect (see Pappas, 2021).



## POST-SESSION AND POST-PROJECT SURVEYS

### RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING WITHIN THE GROUP

Relationship-building was an important aspect of this PV project as relationships play a major role in DEIB and campus climate. The post-project survey found that all participants felt that the project successfully helped build relationships and mentorships. We assessed these relationships and feelings over time through the surveys via questions centered on feelings of belonging, connection to the group vs individuals, and connection changes over time. The following results include feedback from both the post-session as well as the post-project surveys. Since we wanted to track how the participants' feelings developed over time, i.e. the course of the project, our findings are organized by the different psycho-emotional elements investigated in the surveys by session.

### BELONGINGNESS AND CONNECTION.

This project aimed to contribute to a sense of belonging on campus. To ascertain whether PV was a successful tool to that end, we asked questions related to feeling welcome in the group and the connections people were feeling throughout. The beginning of the project saw a mixed response, where 80% agreed and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed with feeling welcomed. After sessions two through four, all respondents strongly agreed that the group was welcoming. The question of connection to the PV group received predominantly positive and a few neutral responses throughout the project.

To explore what aspects of the project, if any, promoted the development of connections within the group, we asked: "What aspect of the work this week made you feel most connected to the group?" The options included the photo assignment, the website comment features, the weekly session, discussion with other members outside of the weekly session, or participants had the option to note that they did not feel connected to the group that week. Each week, most participants chose the weekly session as having generated the most connection. However, the photo assignment in Session One and the external discussions after Sessions Three and Four also produced feelings of connectedness. This may be indicative of the development and growth of relationships within and beyond the group setting. Session Two, which focused on challenging and negative experiences, was not a strong contributor to feelings of connectedness.

After the first session, 80% of participants agreed that they felt connected to the PV group as a whole; 20% disagreed. Everyone indicated that they felt connected to at least some of the other group members. The post-session survey yielded remarks such as: "I felt support from the comments that the group members shared with each other and with me. I felt support from the intentional space that was left open for thinking and reflection. I appreciate the themes that were developed and the opportunity to revise or respond." Overall, discussing the positive aspects of campus and bonding over commonalities was effective in creating social ties and connections early in the project.

After Session Two, which covered the negative experiences on campus, 66.7% neither agreed nor disagreed with feeling connected to the group while 33.3% strongly agreed. 33% strongly agreed, agreed, and strongly disagreed evenly when asked if they felt connected to *any* individuals in the group. In the post-session survey, one participant expressed how "It is interesting that there are all women in the group. We have similar lived experiences, which makes for greater connection." Although, as mentioned in the "Participants" section, the intent had not been to create a female-centered experience, this happenstance impacted the dynamics and dialogue of the project. It is unclear what caused the change in connection as participants did not note any significant issues with the topics of discussion or perception of others' commitment



levels. It is possible that the negative nature of the subject for the session had a negative impact on feelings of connectedness, although this was not explicitly stated. However, one participant did note concerns about keeping up with the pace of the sessions and balancing her commitments.

The participants were also asked to indicate whether the perceived commitment level of other participants affected their experiences with the project. Each week, most participants responded with “no,” some to the effect of, “Everyone who is participating seems very thoughtful in their contributions. If anything, their thoughtfulness makes me more thoughtful.” However, one participant stated: “Yes. This is a very revealing exercise and a perceived low level of commitment from other participants feels like a higher level of risk that privacy would be breached. Lower psychological safety.” This response could potentially explain why some neither agreed nor disagreed regarding the connection to the group. Fear of saying something that may get out and impact one’s employment could lead to feeling disconnected and reluctant. One respondent also noted: “This project is great, my disconnect is a function of my own angst and stress.” This response indicates the participant’s desire to participate fully as well as her lack of bandwidth in her current situation. As she did not further elaborate on her “angst and stress,” it is uncertain if these were caused by the topic, external factors, or both. Had follow-up been conducted via interviews rather than questionnaires, more in-depth answers to these questions and clarity may have resulted (see “Making the Most of It”).

After Session Three, which covered the things the participants could not say, 60% agreed and 40% neither agreed nor disagreed regarding their connectedness to the group, while 100% expressed feeling connected to at least some of the individuals. Overall, the remarks were similar to the exemplary “I felt support through the solidarity within the group.”

Session Four, discussing the things that brought participants joy, saw the highest levels of connection where 100% of the members agreed they felt connected to the entire group. One participant stated: “I don’t think there’s been any other day, at least for me, when I feel like there is this connectedness that I have to every single person on the call.” When asked about individual connections, 80% strongly agreed they felt a connection to others and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed. When asked about the perceived commitment level of others affecting their commitment, most participants responded “no;” however, one participant felt that “Yes. It seems that less participation from others makes it more acceptable to show up less. Even if it [is] not a conscious choice.” This comment may speak to the lack of individual connection due to a perceived imbalance in dedication to the group.

#### CONNECTION OVER TIME.

We gauged how the participants’ connection to the group changed throughout by asking them to note any increase or decrease. After each session, the majority felt an increase. However, each session also saw at least one respondent who felt a decrease or no change. Over time, participants noted that their perceptions of others being consistently committed to the project inspired their desire to be consistent in their commitment.

#### FEELING VALUED.

We aimed to monitor whether members felt valued in the project. After Session One, 80% agreed, and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed. Following Sessions Two, Three, and Four, 100% of members strongly agreed they felt valued. One participant shared: “I wanted to say thank you to everyone. I needed this so much... My disabilities are challenging for me. [...] when I [had] moments of immobility, I [used] my camera to tell my story of spaces I wanted to go into, the things I wanted to do.” Another stated: “I think the level of follow-up and support has been outstanding and is the very reason I participated and enrolled two more to join us.”



**Expression.** When asked whether members felt they had sufficient opportunity to share their experiences during the weekly sessions, responses varied. Each session saw a majority agreement. Overall, only Sessions One and Two saw disagreement or a neutral response from one participant. When asked whether members felt that other participants had sufficient opportunity to share their experiences in the PV group, the answers consistently showed 100% agreement. The difference in agreements after the first two sessions could be due to being more accustomed to the sessions and making space for others, as well as the departure of a group member, leaving more space for others to speak more often. In the survey, one participant remarked, “I felt supported in that others in the group shared through their pictures what I did not have room to share in mine. It makes me feel reflected in a more comprehensive way.” Her sentiments speak to the commonalities the women shared and how they felt represented within the group.

We asked whether members experienced this group as a space where they felt they could freely express themselves. After Session One, 80% agreed while 20% answered neither agree nor disagree. Sessions Two, Three, and Four saw 100% agreement to varying degrees (i.e. either strongly agree or agree). One member remarked that “The listening is very generative. I found it very safe to disagree.” Overall, the participants felt comfortable disagreeing with the themes or sharing their personal stories without judgement or criticism.

**Identity Support.** We asked whether the PV group was a supportive space for people of color. All four sessions saw 100% agreement. We asked participants to reflect on their identities and to describe if they felt support or discrimination based off those identities. We also asked them to consider whether any of their identities prevented them from fully engaging with the group. The participants agreed with sentiments such as “I felt supported in my identities and did not feel discrimination in any way in the Photovoice group.” This was an important goal as Black women are not a monolith and the participants would arrive to the group with differing identities and leadership statuses or roles on campus.

Despite these differences in personalities, abilities, and academic hierarchy, all members felt supported and valued in the group each week. One participant remarked: “I feel supported as a Black woman, in general. There are many traditions that I recognize that many of the women in the group also recognize. Having a shared experience, language, and belief system is always nice.” Despite their differences, the women were able to find commonalities and attributes over which they bonded. They expressed this through reflections such as: “This has been a burden of love. A ticket into this circle, to be loved, to be authentic, to find vocabulary to talk about things that are going on in our brains... unbelievably helpful.”

#### META-LEVEL REFLECTIONS ON THE PERSONAL EFFECTS OF PROJECT PARTICIPATION SHARED DURING DISCUSSIONS

During one of the sessions, one participant remarked, “I’m sitting here typing notes because, like, you’ve helped me bring together my whole conceptualization, probably, [for] my dissertation.” Their dialogues stirred up ideas and motivations for the women in their academic and personal lives. In discussing the photos, one participant noted how “All of the pictures resonated on various levels of my intersectional experience. Visually, the colors and subjects made me think from a more reflexive way.” She remarked how the photos added a useful element to the experience by triggering deeper reflection. On multiple occasions, participants made statements such as: “I don’t think that was my initial interpretation, but I love that point” and “I hadn’t thought about it like that until you said it.” This speaks to the power of the group dynamic that developed over the course of the project. Additional comments highlighted the individual development throughout the project as well as the importance of collective engagement and support initiatives. One participant stated:



"I think the project has been very exciting. I enjoy thinking and reflecting with the women in the group. I find their perspectives to be interesting and thoughtful. I feel like I have stretched [my] thinking. I feel that I have made connections that I had not previously considered."

### BIG PICTURE FEEDBACK

In response to the post-project survey, everyone indicated that the Photovoice project had had a positive outcome for them. One participant commented: "It's been a lovely spac[e] of safety and confession and normalizing what it's like to be a black woman academic and it still be grounded and still be selfless and be all those things and to be validated." Most participants also agreed that this project had a positive outcome for the whole group (one response indicated "neither agree nor disagree"). All participants agreed that the PV project had accomplished what it set out to accomplish in terms of building relationships and mentorships. All participants also agreed that they found the project enriching. One participant noted: "I found joy in finding the pictures and taking the pictures and thinking artfully. I found joy in sitting in a sister circle and getting to hear and hold space with like the most amazing women that I've encountered in my journey."

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING

One of the purposes of this project was to examine if PV could be useful for promoting a sense of DEIB on campus. Overall, our participants found the PV group to be a place where their diversity was embraced. They felt equity and inclusion while sharing and being heard, and they found a place where they belonged as they shared their experiences and the comfort of a circle of other Black women in academia. One participant noted: "I felt supported by our group. My peers were responsive to one another and to me and presented positive feedback to one another. There were no negative barriers that prevented me from engaging with the group." Another stated: "The facilitation [has been] extremely skillful. Lots of psychological safety to participate as we can. That's one of the high points of the project. Feels like trauma-informed facilitation."

While the University centered its task forces and research on DEI, we included belonging as an important aspect for creating a truly progressive and social justice-oriented campus. Belonging is the embodiment of DEI work and its fruition. Feelings of belongingness were at times reflected in participant statements that expressed a sense of responsibility towards each other and ownership of the project process. For instance, "I wanted to make sure that what I submitted was not just the ticking of the box. Like I really wanted to make sure it was thoughtful and representative of the assignment. I feel like it was necessary to maintain quality. I wanted to make it worthy of the conversation [and] of our time." Similarly, "Everyone who is participating seems very thoughtful in their contributions. If anything, their thoughtfulness makes me more thoughtful!" Others expressed being more present and intentional in the moment, connecting more. They shared: "I wanted to be fully present to the project and participate at a high level," and "One of the things that this [PV project] has caused me to do is take pause. When I noticed something beautiful and when I noticed something that makes me stop and wonder, I've given myself permission to examine it a little further and to not be in such a rush to move on to the next thing. I feel over-scheduled... But there are moments where things will just catch me, and I need to start acknowledging those things."

### REMOTE PARTICIPATION

The modality of remote participation did not appear to hinder the development of a sense of inclusion and belonging. All respondents agreed that the project felt enriching despite the lack of in-person interaction. When asked whether participating online made it challenging to contribute to the group, half of the respondents indicated that they strongly disagreed and the other half



neither agreed nor disagreed. Nevertheless, all respondents agreed that participating online still made them feel heard. Also, all respondents agreed that the option to participate online increased their motivation to join the project. Participants noted similar appreciation with comments such as “[I] felt I was listened to and thoughtfully let in on the discussion.” Overall, the remote format did not negatively impact feelings of belonging or connection within the group and future PV-project-facilitating Ombuds should not hesitate to use this modality.

## DISCUSSION OF PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PLANNING YOUR OWN PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

### COMPLIANCE WITH IOA STANDARDS

Ombuds are committed to the IOA standards of practice, at the fore of which is confidentiality. Thus, when first learning about Photovoice, many Ombuds may ask the same question that Institutional Review Boards ask as well: What about confidentiality? The answer is that PV poses no greater risk to participant/visitor confidentiality than a classic group dialogue process would. Unless they consciously decide to depict themselves in their photos, the participants remain behind the camera and retain control over the sharing of their images. Other group members will know who shared what, which is also the case in other types of group facilitation. It can be hypothesized that due to the prolonged nature of PV processes and the evident development of supportive relationships over the course of a project, it becomes *less* likely that up front agreements of keeping each other’s contributions confidential will be violated, compared to one-time group dialogues.

In addition, the voluntary and off-the-records nature of participation in a PV project and the use of the project outcomes as a tool for providing thematic and systemic upward feedback within the organization rather than receiving formal notice of complaints on its behalf are consistent with the IOA standard of informality (IOA, 2022). Instead of merely creating a written report that aggregates visitor concerns and thereby providing anonymized upward feedback on identified themes and systemic concerns (Pappas, 2021), PV enables the Ombuds to take a visual artifact out of the project space and share it with the upper administration (Reimers, 2015). As stated by Winkler and Dauber (2014), “We process images more rapidly than words, giving them visceral emotional power. Visual stimuli heighten viewer attention, improve message recall, and [can] change audience opinion” (p. 1). Thus, it is more likely that the visitors’ concerns will be heard while the level of formality is no greater than that of any other Ombuds report shared for upward feedback.

Regarding impartiality, Ombuds are expected to consider all issues and people fairly and objectively and promote equitably administered processes without advocating for any one individual (IOA, 2022). Yet as Pappas (2021) has persuasively argued, Ombuds are faced with a “Paradox of Informal Justice” that puts at odds the maintenance of an Ombuds’ “reputation for impartiality while advocating for systemic changes” (p. 20). The resulting “tension between adhering to the field’s principles and maintaining their ability to be persuasive and effective” is one that all Ombuds experience (Pappas, 2021, p. 20). Therefore, it is important to take an inductive approach to project generation akin to the way inductive research starts with the collection of data and identification of patterns as a starting point to theory development. The establishment of a project should be the result of responsiveness to observed visitor trends and requests. The option of pursuing such a project needs to be equitably open to any visitor group and approached as a tool for facilitating “communication, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving [and helping to] identify a range of reasonable options to surface or resolve issues or concerns” (IOA, 2022). It should further be emphasized that Photovoice does not *give* voice to its participants, but rather that it lends a megaphone to them so their already existing voices can be heard (Reimers, 2015). It is a process that supports the participants’ agency and self-advocacy,



not one in which the facilitator becomes the advocate. This is consistent with the Ombuds role being one that helps visitors *feel* heard, supports visitor self-determination, and ensures that concerns are brought to decision-makers' attention (Pappas, 2021).

While developing projects in response to visitor trends and requests, it is important for the Ombuds to have "sole discretion over whether or how to engage regarding individual, group, or systemic concerns" and the freedom to raise concerns with appropriate individuals in the organization (IOA, 2022). To keep the Ombuds' independence intact, projects should not be dictated by organizational leadership, nor should they be funded by any interested party. Altogether it is crucial to discuss the IOA standards of practice with individuals interested in an Ombuds-facilitated PV project in the same way that it is necessary to cover them before engaging with other visitors to manage expectations and establish a shared understanding of the rules of engagement.

### GENERALIZABILITY

Another concern may arise regarding the generalizability of insights based on contributions made by a small number of people. While this may be more of a scholarly/academic concern than one of Ombuds *practice*, it is worth noting that this is a common question for qualitative researchers and scholar practitioners to address. It is important to contextualize a project of this nature and present it in conjunction with other sources of data as we did in the introduction, referencing the surveys and affinity groups specific to GSU as well as related research and the socio-historical context. Gathering data from a variety of sources allows for triangulation and corroboration of insights. Making another comparison to more widely known small group dialogue processes, it is notable that PV offers the added benefit of being able to transport insights out of the project space and into the surrounding community (Reimers, 2015). This can take a variety of forms and allows for broader community engagement, feedback, and thus triangulation. For example, captioned images can be shown in exhibitions and viewer feedback generated. They can also be published on a website and a comment function can be enabled. In this way, further input from additional members of the target group/stakeholders can be generated.

### MAIN CHALLENGE

The main challenge to overcome as a PV facilitator is the high level of required effort and commitment. This manifests in participant recruitment, retention, and completion of follow-up surveys, which often requires repeat-prompting. Thankfully, our participants received our "nudges" graciously as evidenced in this feedback: "The shame-free follow-up emails are awesome." The amount of time and energy a PV project requires from both facilitators and participants should not be underestimated. It is an involved process that requires dedication, which was reflected in some of the participant feedback we received, e.g.: "At this moment, sitting/connecting for two hours is a struggle due to my schedule," and "Not sure I can keep up with the pace and all the end of the year requirements."

A few measures to mitigate this challenge are to 1) be transparent about the required effort and commitment from the onset of recruitment; 2) expect attrition and over-recruit; 3) be thoughtful about timing; 4) involve participants in scheduling decisions; and 5) explain your rationales for every part of the process to generate buy-in for the more tenuous aspects like filling out surveys. Every institution has its recurring annual flow. In the case of universities, this is largely dictated by the increased intensity at the beginning and end of each semester, so it is advisable to schedule a project outside of those phases to mitigate any additional burden. One participant recommended that it would be helpful to schedule sessions towards the end of the workday. This may work better for some than for others since classes are not always scheduled based on a



traditional 9-6 schedule, which is why it is crucial to generate early input from potential participants.

#### MAKING THE MOST OF IT

Having facilitated multiple PV projects, a learning curve pertaining to the photo quality could be observed in each one. While participants have always been receptive to the initial photography training session and excited to put the lesson into practice, it takes a while to absorb the information and become adept at applying it. One participant recommended: “Consider adding more detailed examples to the thoughtful photo lesson; perhaps have one or two previous participants come back to share their experience and process or have them record their experiences so that the new study participants can review it as needed.” Considering the transient nature of university community membership, it may be difficult to bring back previous participants. However, the idea of recording their testimonies and advice could be useful for both recruitment and training.

In retrospect, post-project interviews rather than an additional survey would have been preferable. While the group was small (and thus did not ideally lend itself to a quantitative survey), its members were thoughtful and willing to be vulnerable and expressive in conversation. This did not equally translate into the survey response rate and complexity of feedback. Richer data and deeper insights could have been derived from one-on-one interviews. This was evidenced in the informal conversations that took part post-project, which pointed to the importance of capturing said feedback in a more facilitative way. We therefore recommend making follow-up interviews a standard part of PV project facilitation, especially when used as an Ombuds tool.

#### CONCLUSION

The Comprehensive Conflict Engagement Model (CCEM) suggests that to be long-term sustainable and effective, conflict interventions need to 1) target the internal, interpersonal, and structural bases of conflict; 2) be transportable beyond the immediate conflict management space, and 3) be sustained through long-term engagement (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012; Mayer, 2012; Reimers, 2015, 2016). As permanent employees, Ombuds are uniquely positioned to engage long-term with visitors and stakeholders, and to use creative methods and tools to engage conflicts (3).

Producing captioned imagery that can be shared in a variety of ways outside of the project space – including reports to the upper administration, exhibits and conference presentations for the broader community, and articles shared with peers – the reach of Photovoice goes beyond the immediate small-group dialogue space (2). At the conclusion of this project, the OOO presented the project outcomes in its annual report. This included a summary of main insights, the sharing of exemplary captioned images and participant quotes, and the proposition of recommendations for addressing the main concerns. These included but were not limited to salary adjustments, the creation of a mentorship matching program, the facilitation of greater work-life balance, the expression of appreciation and recognition outside of publication acknowledgements, and the intentional re-design and beautification of campus spaces, both in- and outdoors (Reimers, 2023). The annual report was directly shared and discussed with members of the upper administration and made available to the broader university community via the OOO website. It echoed, visually supplemented, and thereby both reinforced and provided nuance for many of the findings shared by the GSU Task Force for Racial Equity (2020) and the Commission for the Next Generation of Faculty (2019).



The participants further identified opportunities for presenting their work at university events and wrote an article to share their experiences with their external academic peers. The project also resulted in the establishment of a formal advisor/advisee relationship and collaboration on new projects among individual group members.

The commentary and feedback provided by the PV participants reflects the profound impact PV participation can have on the way individuals feel about themselves and their experiences, how they can connect and create community and a sense of belonging, and how they can feel empowered to fight for structural changes (1). These results suggest that PV is a valuable addition to any Ombuds kit and a powerful tool to be used in the pursuit of DEIB on university campuses.

This was the second project of its kind conducted by the GSU OOO. The first one engaged trans members of the campus community, and an additional request has been received for a project with university community members with disabilities. This resonance among diverse groups highlights the promise of PV as a creative Ombuds tool and change agent for fostering DEIB. Its long-term effectiveness hinges on the interest, support, and responsiveness of upper administration. Therefore, it is crucial to ascertain buy-in from the onset to create the pipeline for upward feedback and lay the foundation for systemic transformations.



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## APPENDIX A

Photovoice SHOWeD guiding questions (Wang et al, 2004, p.151)

“SHOWeD”:

What do you **S**ee here?

What is really **H**appening?

How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

**W**hy does this problem or strength exist?

What can we **D**o about it?



## APPENDIX B

### POST-SESSION SURVEYS

Unless noted, question responses are Likert style with strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree response options)

#### **Connections**

*Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements in respect to your connection to the group/project.*

I understand the purpose of the Photovoice group.

I understand the purpose of the latest assignment.

I found the Photovoice group to be welcoming.

I engaged thoughtfully with the Photovoice group this week.

I feel connected to the Photovoice group as a whole.

I feel connected to some individuals in the Photovoice group.

I feel valued in the Photovoice group.

What aspect of the work this week made you feel most connected to the group?

- The photo assignment
- The website comment feature
- The weekly session
- Discussion with other members outside of the weekly session
- I did not feel connected to the group this week.

What contribution from another Photovoice member resonated with you today? (Open-ended)

#### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)**

*Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements in respect to DEIB*

I felt that I had sufficient opportunity to share my experiences in the Photovoice group.

I felt that everyone had sufficient opportunity to share their experiences in the Photovoice group.

I feel this Photovoice group is a space where I can express myself freely.

I feel this Photovoice group is a supportive space for people of color.

Reflecting on your identities, in what ways, if any, did you feel support or discrimination in the Photovoice group? (Also consider whether any of your identities prevented you from fully engaging with the group) (open-ended)



**Commitment**

*Please rate your level of commitment to the Photovoice Project (Scale of 1 to 10)*

Do you believe the modality of participation has affected your commitment level?

Yes, I feel more committed when participating in person.

Yes, I feel less committed when participating in person.

Yes, I feel more committed when participating online.

Yes, I feel less committed when participating online.

No, the modality has not affected my level of commitment.

Does your perceived commitment level of other participants affect your experience with the project? Explain (open-ended)

Is there anything the facilitators can do that can increase your commitment to the project? (open-ended)

Has your connection to the group increased or decreased since the last session?

Greatly decreased

Decreased

No Change

Increased

Greatly increased



## APPENDIX C

### POST-PROJECT SURVEY

What motivated you to join this Photovoice project? (open-ended)

#### Impact

I feel the Photovoice group has had a positive outcome for me.

I feel the Photovoice group has had a positive outcome for the whole group.

I feel the impact that the Photovoice group will have on DEIB on campus will be.

- Very strong
- Strong
- Neutral
- Weak
- Very weak

I think the impact our PV group will have on impacting DEIB positively on campus will be:

- Very strong impact
- Strong impact
- Neutral
- Little impact
- Very little impact

Having participated in this project, I have a stronger sense of DEIB in the X community.

I feel the Photovoice group accomplished what it set out to accomplish in terms of building relationships.

I feel the Photovoice group accomplished what it set out to accomplish in terms of building mentorships.

#### Remote Participation

Participating remotely felt enriching despite the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Participating online made it challenging to contribute to the group.

Participating online still made me feel heard in the Photovoice group.

Did the opportunity to attend online increase or decrease your motivation to participate.

#### Summary

Please rate the following tasks considering the level of effort needed to complete the tasks: (1 - being little effort, 5 - being a lot of effort)

- Taking the weekly photos
- Submitting/Captioning the photos
- Showing up to each session
- Actively engaging in each session



Completing the post-session survey

How "enriching" did you find the Photovoice project?

Not enriching at all

A little enriching

Somewhat enriching

Pretty enriching

Completely enriching

Please share what factors affected your ability to prioritize and complete the different components of this project? (open-ended)

Please leave any comments, suggestions, or thoughts on how to improve Photovoice projects in the future: (open-ended)