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Co-Exploring Meaning in Everyday Life for People in Mental Health Recovery: A Photovoice Study

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Abstract

Research on mental health recovery points to an interdependent relationship between experiences of meaning and experiences of recovery; meaning in everyday life promotes recovery, and recovery promotes meaning in everyday life. In this study we address the following question: What do people with mental challenges find meaningful in their everyday life? To explore this question, we offered disposable cameras to people with mental health challenges and asked them to photograph whatever makes their life meaningful. As part of the collaborative procedure of the study, a competence group contributed to different stages of the research process and the visual data were analyzed by the participants themselves in a participant-driven thematic analysis. Through the analysis the participants constructed seven topics addressing the research question: (1) plants and trees, (2) poems and texts, (3) art, (4) music, (5) going for a walk, (6) esthetics, and (7) public movement. An important methodological implication of the study is how photovoice can be a useful way of generating knowledge from the first-person perspective. The participants' findings may be interpreted as "small things" that are easily overlooked. When the competence group viewed the participants' photos, they talked about photos they expected to see but found to be missing. Therefore, we offer a discussion related to the photovoice methodology and suggest the importance of considering absent but expected photographs in such a study.

Keywords

meaningfulness, everyday life, photovoice, thematic analysis, recovery, mental health, supported housing

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Co-Exploring Meaning in Everyday Life for People in Mental Health Recovery: A Photovoice Study

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Research on mental health recovery points to an interdependent relationship between experiences of meaning and experiences of recovery; meaning in everyday life promotes recovery, and recovery promotes meaning in everyday life. In this study we address the following question: What do people with mental challenges find meaningful in their everyday life? To explore this question, we offered disposable cameras to people with mental health challenges and asked them to photograph whatever makes their life meaningful. As part of the collaborative procedure of the study, a competence group contributed to different stages of the research process and the visual data were analyzed by the participants themselves in a participant-driven thematic analysis. Through the analysis the participants constructed seven topics addressing the research question: (1) plants and trees, (2) poems and texts, (3) art, (4) music, (5) going for a walk, (6) esthetics, and (7) public movement. An important methodological implication of the study is how photovoice can be a useful way of generating knowledge from the first-person perspective. The participants' findings may be interpreted as "small things" that are easily overlooked. When the competence group viewed the participants' photos, they talked about photos they expected to see but found to be missing. Therefore, we offer a discussion related to the photovoice methodology and suggest the importance of considering absent but expected photographs in such a study.

Keywords: meaningfulness, everyday life, photovoice, thematic analysis, recovery, mental health, supported housing

Introduction

By giving disposable cameras to people in mental health recovery living in supported housing, we explore sources of meaningfulness in their everyday life. Meaning in life is essential for most people (Frankl, 1959; Yalom, 2020) and people in recovery are as likely as any other citizens to seek meaning in life (Slade, 2012).

Recovery can be conceptualized in different ways; clinical recovery is a medical-psychiatric outcome perspective on recovery, whilst personal recovery deals with a person's own perspectives, experiences, processes, and active participation. Recovery can be understood as the ability to live the best life possible within the limitations of disabilities such as mental health and/or substance use challenges (Oute & Jørgensen, 2021). We position this study within the latter conceptualization and aim to explore the first-person perspective on recovery.

We understand recovery to involve both personal and social processes because personal recovery does not occur in a vacuum. Recovery processes are personally and individually experienced in multiple contexts and in relations between people and between people and their environment, including material conditions (Klevan et al., 2021; Sommer et al., 2021) within

the context of “normal” everyday environments (Borg & Davidson, 2007). Housing represents material conditions that are vital for everyday life and supported housing can be a platform for recovery processes (Gonzalez & Andvig, 2015; Ogundipe et al., 2020). Moving out of institutions and into supported housing can give people an identity that is more than a mental diagnosis, representing a change in identity that can make life more meaningful (Friesinger et al., 2019).

Recovery and the experience of meaning in everyday life seem to be mutually reinforcing processes because recovery can be a process of creating a meaningful life (Davidson & White, 2007; Deegan, 1988; Hipolito et al., 2011; Leamy et al., 2011), and to experience recovery can be a source of meaning in life itself (Pilgrim, 2009). Within the field of mental health recovery research there is a consensus on the importance of meaningful activities in everyday life for the experience of recovery (De Ruyscher et al., 2017; Doroud et al., 2015, 2022; Ness et al., 2014; Ørjasæter et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2018; Sørensen et al., 2015; Veseth et al., 2022). The meaningful activity most recognized by people in recovery is having an ordinary job (Borg & Davidson, 2007; Doroud et al., 2015; Hansen & Bjerger, 2017). Sports and physical exercise, hobbies, education, creating art, reading, and writing, visiting friends, and cultural and religious activities are all considered meaningful from the first-person perspective (De Ruyscher et al., 2017; Ness et al., 2014).

While finding meaning in everyday life is integral to recovery, the source of meaning can vary greatly between individuals (Andersen et al., 2003). Personal meaning and lived experiences from first-person perspectives remain neglected in mental health recovery research. It is therefore recommended to shift the focus from what facilitates recovery to how recovery comes about in each person’s unique process (De Ruyscher et al. 2017; Ness et al. 2014).

When Nesse et al. (2020) asked residents in supported housing about their occupational status, they found that most reported being engaged in “unspecified occupations.” The authors interpreted this as an indication that despite a general lack of formal engagement, participants found their own ways of engaging. Tjörnstrand et al. (2020) stated that there appears to be a knowledge gap concerning activities of residents in supported housing, such as what they do in or outside their home, what activities they engage in and how they feel about what they do during a typical day.

By giving people cameras, we aimed to explore their “own ways of engaging” inside and outside of their home in supported housing, thus enabling the first-person perspective on meaning in daily life to be visualized and voiced. Cameras could capture what the participants find meaningful to do in the community, in the housing facility and inside their own apartment. Everyday life research requires access to aspects of daily life otherwise hidden from researchers (like a person’s home), and photovoice is regarded as an ideal methodology for this purpose (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). We regard this methodology to be suitable for exploring the first-person perspective because of the possibility it offers “of perceiving the world from the viewpoint of people who are leading lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 172). The specific research question for this study is: What do people with mental challenges living in supported housing find meaningful in their everyday life? By addressing this research question, we voice first-person perspectives, which is in line with the global disability rights movement’s slogan “nothing about us without us” (Borg & Karlsson, 2021). These perspectives are not only useful but also necessary for recovery-oriented researchers and professionals on a local and a global level.

The paper’s aim and the choice of methodology were determined through collaboration between the three authors. We share a twofold academic interest in (a) the research topic of recovery and (b) scientific theory and methodology (constructions of knowledge). Recovery

also holds a special interest for the first author, who has been sober since 2014 following a stay at a rehabilitation clinic. We share an interest in how knowledge is constructed and aim to explore the discourses in qualitative research and within the field of mental health recovery. Our methodological choice to conduct a photovoice study instead of doing qualitative interviews, and to invite the participants themselves to do the thematic analysis, is an expression of our discursive gaze and positioning. We have tried to create a collaborative design with the intention of challenging a field traditionally dominated by researchers by including first-person perspectives on recovery and thus allowing multiple voices to be heard.

Methodology

Design

This study was part of a larger mixed methods research project entitled “From double trouble to dual recovery.” The research project had a collaborative approach involving residents and staff in supported housing in researching recovery practices (Nesse et al., 2022). The study is qualitative and exploratory and generated knowledge in collaboration with (1) a “competence group” (Nesse et al., 2022; Soggiu et al., 2020; Trangsrud et al., 2021) consisting of former residents, staff members and researchers which met four times until this article was written. The purpose of having a competence group was to bring different voices into the research process to include multiple perspectives. The members contributed with valuable knowledge about the research context, both from the perspective of having been a resident and of being a staff member. The group contributed to planning the data generation, conducting a pilot photovoice study and discussing findings from the data analysis (Tønnessen et al., 2023). We also collaborated with (2) the research participants themselves, who provided the visual data material, performed the participant-driven data analysis, and generated the findings from the visual material (Mizock et al., 2014).

These collaborations formed the inclusive co-exploratory design of the study, which had the aim of presenting a broad range of views and encouraging rich, nuanced meaning making rather than consensus in knowledge construction (Braun & Clarke, 2022a).

Epistemological Positioning: An Inclusive form of Knowledge Construction

Research can never be conducted in a theoretical vacuum because researchers always make assumptions about data and about how knowledge is developed (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022a; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Coemans et al. (2019) suggest that when conducting a photovoice study, researchers need to be clear about the theoretical lens that inspires them. Photovoice enables us to explore how people construct meaning based on what matters to them (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997) and the taken-for-granted aspects of their everyday life (Liebenberg, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1994). This foundation fits well with our social constructionist epistemological positioning. We acknowledge that meaning in everyday life is subjective and influenced by discourses regulating how we view meaningful living.

Social constructionist theory, which is concerned with people’s co-constructed meaning-making and knowledge production, understands research itself as a social construction based on assumptions that are situated within relationships and socio-cultural contexts and acknowledges that there are always taken-for-granted logics in any context (Gergen, 2015, 2020; McNamee, 2010). Some ways of speaking and acting are taken for granted and are therefore expressions of discourses (McNamee, 2015). Mannay (2010) argues that visual methods such as photovoice can be used to “make the familiar strange” to notice

what is taken for granted in each context. Sutton-Brown (2014) describe how photovoice is well suited for generating new insights into socially constructed realities and cultures.

Photovoice has been found to be an empowering research method for studying processes of recovery from mental distress (Milasan et al., 2020). However, Coemans et al. (2019) stress the need for researchers to conceptualize the specific type of empowerment they aim to achieve. In our study we conceptualize empowerment as “as little management as possible” in both data generation and data analysis (p. 55). We find that this conceptualization fits well with our co-exploratory design and our social constructionist epistemological positioning.

Photovoice

Our study rests upon an understanding of recovery as something that unfolds in people’s lives. Photovoice is regarded as an ideal methodology for researching the first-person perspective in everyday life (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1994) because it makes it possible to capture of aspects of people’s lives that are not easily accessible with traditional research methods (Cabassa et al., 2013a). Photovoice was originally developed by Wang and Burris (1994, 1997) with the aim of enabling people to act as recorders and potential catalysts for change in their own communities by entrusting them with cameras (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). In reviewing photovoice research, Lal et al. (2012) and Catalani and Minkler (2010) found that most studies modify the methodology, tailoring it to fit the specific study. Although the aim of photovoice is often to promote action and social change, it may also be used to inform researchers (Hergenrather et al., 2009; Milne & Muir, 2019) and to educate researchers and professionals about what participants appreciate most about their lives and what needs to change (Wang et al., 1996).

Several photovoice projects have been conducted for people with serious mental illness (Milasan et al., 2020; Mizock et al., 2014). Photovoice is regarded as an appropriate methodology in recovery-oriented mental health care and for exploring meaning and personal experiences in recovery (Vansteenkiste et al., 2021; Vervliet et al., 2019). It is an ideal methodology for use in recovery-oriented mental health research because it is aligned with recovery principles in mental health care (Barry et al., 2020, 2021). Photovoice allows for the identification of research participants’ strengths and the challenges they face, as well as for an understanding of personal experiences that support the recovery journey and produces powerful visual images of “invisible” and taken-for-granted-aspects of everyday life that may not be readily represented in interviews or through verbal data collection methods (Doroud et al., 2022; Liebenberg, 2018; Milne & Muir, 2019; Mizock et al., 2014). It also makes it possible to explore everyday events that people might have difficulty articulating in conventional interviews (Hodgetts et al., 2007). Bendell and Sylvestre (2017) found photovoice to be well suited for exploring the lived lives of individuals in supported housing.

Research Context, Recruitment, and Participants

The research was conducted in a supported housing facility with 12 apartments available for people with mental health and/or substance use challenges in a city in Norway. Each tenant lives alone in a separate apartment, and there is a common area where meals are served by the staff several times a week. The first author was present at dinner once a week over a period of two months to recruit participants, and the staff supported this process by introducing the researcher, hanging posters around the house and putting an information letter in residents’ mailboxes. The staff indicated that one resident should not be asked to participate

in the study as he had expressed a wish to not have any relation to the staff and the other residents. The ten other residents were all invited to participate and four agreed.

The participants were three males and one female between the ages of 38 and 59. When we asked about their reason for living at the facility, they cited mental health issues and/or the need for somewhere to live. All the participants had been inpatients in various mental health facilities for shorter or longer periods before being offered their current apartment. The participants were not asked about their mental health diagnoses, but they have in common that their mental health challenges are not characterized as severe. To be granted an apartment at the housing facility one has to have moderate mental health and/or substance use challenges. None of the participants had an ordinary job, but all had social security benefits as income.

Research Ethics

The Norwegian Center for Research Data approved the study (ref no.: 2017/269858) with the limitation that the participants could not take pictures of people in such a way that they could be recognized. The participants were given full information about the study, and they provided written informed consent regarding (a) taking photos with a camera and (b) talking about the photos afterwards. They were informed of their right to be anonymized in the process of transcribing the material; all participants were therefore given pseudonyms and all personally identifiable information was either removed or changed. They were also informed about their right to withdraw their consent at any time and about their ownership of their photos. All were offered a set of paper copies and the negatives, and all agreed to the researchers keeping a digital set to use in publications and presentations. All data are stored securely in a password-protected file and in a lockable cabinet, located in an office at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Storage is approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data until the end of March 2025. In addition to the authors, a manager has access to the cabinet. Some of the photos show people from behind but are not sufficiently anonymized to be made public. These photos have therefore been excluded from publications and presentations but are included in the analysis. All participants consented to share their photos with the other participants in the group analysis meeting. One of the participants was prevented from joining the meeting but wanted his photos to be included in the analysis conducted by the others.

Data Generation

Prior to the data generation we conducted a pilot study in which two participants from the competence group (former residents) and the first author took photos with a disposable camera responding to the prompt “What do you find meaningful in your everyday life?” Barry et al. (2021) also describes researchers participating in photovoice data generation. Our purpose was to learn about the technical use of a disposable camera and how the photo assignment worked.

During the pilot study we discovered several good reasons for using a disposable camera. This type of camera emphasizes photographic content more than artistic value (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). Because they do not offer the possibility of editing and deleting photos, disposable cameras were suitable for straightforward documentation and capturing everyday life as it is. Many research participants were familiar with taking multiple pictures every day with mobile phone cameras, but for many a disposable camera was rather strange and unfamiliar, which might have led to an experience of making the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010).

Through our pilot study we learned to always use the flash when photographing indoors and we concluded that the photo assignment was both specific and open enough. Like Horsfall

et al. (2018), we found that keeping the camera for a period gave us time to think about how to complete the assignment (unlike a research interview where one has to answer there and then). The visual data were generated in two phases: (1) the participants took photos with the camera, which they kept for about a week, and (2) we collected the camera and developed the film on paper and digitally. The numbers of pictures varied from 10 to 26 per participant, with a total of 51 photos.

We wanted the participants to choose their respond to the prompt “What do you find meaningful in your everyday life?” with minimal intervention from researchers. Following Gosselink and Myllykangas (2007), we offered no operational definition of “meaningful”; therefore, each participant used her or his own perspective to construct and make sense of “meaningful.” Tran Smith et al. (2015) found offering minimal instructions to be an effective way to give as much agency as possible to participants. We offered a minimum of training, only enough to ensure that participants could operate the disposable camera, following the assumption that “the way in which untrained photographers take pictures (i.e., personal, or everyday photography) is in itself a rich source of data on cultural and social constructions” (Catalani & Minkler, 2010, p. 441, following Harrison, 2002). An unfortunate result of this decision was that we failed to provide sufficient instructions to one of the participants, resulting in him taking just one photo with his camera. We solved this by providing him with a new camera and made sure that we gave him the necessary training the second time.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we engaged the participants in a thematic analysis of the visual material. This choice was inspired by Milasan et al. (2020), who note that most photovoice studies do not involve participants in the analysis stage, and Mizock et al. (2014) who recommend bringing the voices of people with lived experience into the process of analyzing photovoice content. Against this background, we analyzed the data in two phases: (1) participant-driven thematic analysis of the visual data, conducted by the participants with the first author and (2) presentation of this analysis in the competence group.

In the participant-driven thematic analysis we were inspired by Greco et al. (2017) to use the possibilities inherent in the photovoice methodology to let the participants, not the researchers, choose themes of interest to them. Coemans et al. (2019) argue that it is necessary to be clear about the intentions for “giving voice to” in photovoice studies and critically reflect on whose voices are represented. We tried to respect this by a minimal management of the participants (1) thematic grouping of the photos, and (2) and summarizing and naming the topics. Our analysis is not a well-developed thematical data analysis. Instead, it is a participant-driven thematic “topic summary” analysis, done by the participants themselves. To emphasize the distinction between our not “proper” thematic analysis and a more formal and standard thematical analysis we use Braun and Clarke’s term “topic summaries” for our themes in the following. By making this distinction we address Braun and Clarke’s (2022b) caution against confounding themes and topic summaries in thematic analysis. By referring to “topic summaries” we acknowledge that the descriptions of the findings are less detailed than might be expected in a standard thematic analysis. The first author facilitated the analysis process while allowing the participants to have as much control over the process themselves as possible. We recorded the conversation between the participants and transcribed it. We use the transcript to describe our findings below, and almost everything the participants said about each topic is included in these descriptions. We regard it as important to stay as close to the language of the participants as possible because in this way we act as a voice for people who are denied direct access to formal research contexts (i.e., scientific journals).

The analysis proceeded as follows: (a) we spread all the photos on a table and encouraged the participants to look for possible topics across the set of photos; (b) when participants identified photos with a similar topic they put them in a pile, adding photos depicting what they considered similar content as they went along; (c) the participants named each pile, and these names are what we subsequently call “topics,” or “topic summaries.” Such topic summaries can be participant-driven and descriptive, and they are often on a semantic, obvious level (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022a).

Three participants, Kristin, Eddie, and Ibrahim joined the analysis session, which proceeded as described above. Nabil was unable to participate but gave his consent for us to include his ten pictures in the analysis. The researcher focused on hearing participants’ voices in the session and staying close to the language and words of the participants when writing the article. Seven topics were constructed. The topics are interconnected, built on each other, and sometimes overlap. In this paper we resist the temptation to merge, split, or rename topics because we want to stay as true to the participant-driven constructions as possible.

We presented the co-constructed topics in the competence group to expand the co-exploration of the research question. Input from the dialogue in the competence group led to a more nuanced reading of the findings because the group members were tasked with paying particular attention to the photos they thought were missing. Some of their thoughts and comments are presented after the findings and are also brought into the discussion section of this paper.

As Braun and Clarke (2022a) point out, data do not speak for themselves; thus, we acknowledge that this description is our construction and interpretation of the analysis as voiced by the participants and the members of the competence group.

Findings

Seven topics were constructed in the participant-driven thematic analysis: (1) plants and trees, (2) poems and texts, (3) art, (4) music, (5) going for a walk, (6) esthetics, (7) public movement.

Topic (1) “Plants and Trees”

This topic summary refers to participants’ assertion that plants and trees gave meaning to their mundane lives in several ways. The participants explained how looking at, talking to, touching, “making” (when growing plants from seeds), and using (reading under a tree, finding shade from the sun) plants and trees provided meaning in everyday life.

The participants talked about how having houseplants is meaningful in everyday life. The following dialogue between two participants unfolded when they were looking for photos to arrange under the “plants and trees” heading (see Figure 1):

Kristin: Plants are important to have, and some people talk to their flowers.

Eddie: Yes, I touch them and talk to them.

(...)

Kristin: Plants are green, and they’re soothing.

Eddie: Yes, they give you good air.

(...)

Kristin: And they're esthetically beautiful. That is, if you are looking at them.

Figure 1
"Plants and Trees"



Ibrahim listened to the dialog between Kristin and Eddie and added his photos of trees to the pile of photos. He explained how trees were a source of meaning for him because they're friendly things, both in summer and in winter. Ibrahim talked about the trees in his home country. Even though there are no snowy winters like in Norway, the leaves change colors with the seasons. Eddie replied that he likes trees because they are living things, and they give shade from the sun, and you can sit under a tree and read. All participants agreed that trees are beautiful to look at. Eddie had some photos from the rooftop garden at his job center, where he grows different kinds of plants from seeds, an activity that he finds meaningful. Plants and trees have a soothing and calming effect on the participants, in both an esthetic way when they look at something nice and a more tactile way of touching plants, soil and seeds.

Topic (2) "Poems and Texts"

The participants talked about how they find different texts and poems meaningful, including texts written by others, such as song lyrics, which can have content that they recognize in their own lives. The participants discussed the life of Elvis Presley and how it became unmanageable with consequences for his mental health and substance abuse.

The participants also talked about meaningfulness in texts they wrote themselves, such as poems and song lyrics. These were texts that they sometimes learned by heart and used in

different contexts in their life. All the participants seemed to value the storytelling inherent in poems and texts (see Figure 2).

All three participants shared short poems during the analysis meeting. Both Eddie and Kristin's shared poems they had written themselves and memorized, while Ibrahim composed a poem spontaneously on the spot. Kristin explained that writing poems and texts gave meaning to her life: "I get a lot of that bubbling joy and creativity when I put into words things I feel and experience."

Figure 2
"Poems and Texts"



She was referring to writing not only poems but also texts to which she adds a melody. Both Kristin and Eddie had taken photos to illustrate their practice of writing. Eddie had photographed two of his poems that were framed on the wall of his apartment, and during the analysis he read one of them aloud:

Circus artist

I am just a tired, resigned, blasé poet.

I wish I were a real genuine circus artist, an athlete!

For if you give my flowers a shower,

I'll take you all to the top of my tower!

This poem hanging on Eddie's living room wall reminds him of past times, before the start of his mental problems, which still have a strong influence on his everyday life. During the time we spent at the housing facility, Eddie often talked about his ongoing depression and of longing for it to pass. Being able to read out the poem during the analysis meeting made his eyes light up for a moment.

Topic (3) "Art"

Kristin and Eddie shared photos of what they classified under the topic summary "art." Several of Nabil's photos were included in this topic whereas none of Ibrahim's were. The participants talked about how art gave meaning to their lives. For Kristin, art was about expressing different types of emotions and creativity in color on a canvas. Eddie replied that

art sets emotions in motion. Nabil's photos of street art and graffiti expressed in powerful writing and colorful drawings were understood by the other participants as art and Kristin said that they:

(...) reflect the times we live in today, rap and graffiti and art, street art and the fact that it's also against the law, that you [encounter] the police, you get fined and so on, then it becomes a kind of underground movement that pushes forward in society.

The participants seemed to have a broader understanding of art, including the graffiti photographed in the streets as well as art hanging in galleries, both of which they found meaningful (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
"Art"



Topic (4) "Music"

The importance of music as a source of meaning in everyday life is shown in photos of different instruments (see Figure 4) and in Eddie's photos of himself from the "good old days." He said:

From my heyday, it was in the 90s I remember, I played at ... [a well-known bar in the city at the time]. I was very popular and young and handsome then. I was almost a playboy, actually.

Figure 4
“Music”



Kristin, Eddie, and Nabil are musicians, and Ibrahim loves to listen to music. They all find music very meaningful in their lives. They did not all have photos that directly represented listening to music, but that is something they all do in their everyday life. Ibrahim listens to all kinds of music, including blues, soul, and jazz, and both Eddie and Kristin find listening to music inspiring for their own music making. They also shared how music makes them want to move their body and dance. Eddie explained how performing music is a way of expressing one's feelings, creating positive feelings for others and a good mood in an audience, and that performing on a stage can give you a rush and create endorphins and good emotions, and memories to keep. Kristin replied by stating that Eddie generously gives something of himself to the audience in his performances, and by giving to others he gets what she called good karma. Kristin described in detail why music was meaningful in her life, but she also talked about her need for quiet:

I have a lot of music (in my life) (...), all day and all week and the whole month, but then I also need silence, to neutralize the music. And silence, that's just like a basic tone, so you can get up to the next step, in music, you can use it to meditate and get creative. The resonance of silence, where you may hear a drop, you may hear birds chirping, you may hear a lawnmower on the grass, all the time there's an expression of artistic sound, so you can sort of rest your brain. And then the creativity in your brain starts working. Then along comes some tones and some lyrics and so on. And then you can again discover the creativity and joy. I usually tell my music therapist that I get a kind of bubbly feeling in my stomach when she's been here, it bubbles with joy. It stays like that until the afternoon, that bubbling of laughter and joy.

Music was the most talked about and shared topic amongst the participants, and maybe the most versatile topic because when talking about the meaning of music the participants distinguished between (1) making and playing music, (2) listening to music, and (3) the need for silence and the absence of music.

Topic (5) "Going for a Walk"

The participants talked about "going for a walk" as a meaningful element of everyday life. Ibrahim and Eddie, especially, enjoyed going for walks (see Figure 5). Eddie had taken a picture of a pier by the Oslo Fjord where he likes to do his walking, and he described the sea as important to him. Ibrahim likes to go for walks along the Akerselva, a well-known river running through Oslo. Most of Ibrahim's photos were of walks along this river to illustrate what he felt were sources of meaning in his life. He said: "It is a picture from a walk (...) it's under the bridge and the river runs there and goes through the bridge (...) so I see the bridge all the time when I walk there."

He explained that he had been visiting this same area for many years to explore it repeatedly. When placed in a line the photos formed a coherent visual story of the last section of the river before it runs into the sea. There was both a certain stability and a coherence to the sequence of pictures taken alongside this river, which seemed to provide a kind of meaningful constancy in Ibrahim's everyday life.

Figure 5
“Going for a Walk”



Topic (6) “Esthetics”

This topic summary consists mostly of Ibrahim’s photos of architecture such as buildings and bridges. He photographed what he considers to be the most beautiful buildings in the center of Oslo. One of these buildings is a big shopping center which Ibrahim remembers especially from when he moved to Oslo. Kristin, who moved to Oslo from a village in the north of Norway explained:

The first thing I did when I came to Oslo was to go out and look at the trees and look at houses, buildings—Majorstua, Frogner, the city center. I simply couldn’t get enough of looking at the wonderful houses.

Some of Nabil’s photos were also included in this topic because they featured different modern buildings in the city center. These buildings are surrounded by concrete and asphalt, in contrast to the buildings in Ibrahim’s photos, situated in a more natural context with the river, green areas and trees. Ibrahim has a strong fascination for bridges, which is depicted in his photos. He is particularly interested in the different materials used to build bridges, such as metal and wood bridges (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
“Esthetics”



Topic (7) “Public Movement”

The participants found it difficult to name this topic summary, which contained the five remaining photos taken by Ibrahim showing five different trains passing by the window of his apartment (see Figure 7). Trains pass by several times a day, but the line is not busy, so one must be patient and wait to photograph as many as five. This means that Ibrahim spent quite some time at the window snapping the trains as they passed by at full speed. Ibrahim talked about the meaning of the trains in his life:

Ibrahim: It [the train] passes by; sometimes I'm mad at it and sometimes I like it.

All: (laugh)

Kristin: (laughing) Do you yell at the train then?

Ibrahim: (laughing) Yes!

All: (laughs)

Ibrahim: Sometimes I like them because I know they're important to people. They pick up people and they pick up candy.

When asked about how trains give his life meaning, Ibrahim shared that he used to live out in the countryside and every Friday he would take the train. He developed a fascination with trains, which has continued to this day.

Ibrahim suggests the name “public” for the topic and Kristin adds her suggestion “movement,” elaborating that “trains are about movement; people move from one place to another.” Instead of discarding one of the two suggested names the participants decided to combine the two, choosing “public movement.”

Figure 7
“Public Movement”



Presentation to the Competence Group of the Findings Constructed by the Participants

After finishing the participant-driven thematic analysis we presented the seven topic summaries in the competence group, and had a discussion moderated by the first author. The group comprised two former residents (the same two who assisted in the pilot study), two staff members at the housing facility, and two researchers in addition to the first author. All the visual data were presented as grouped and summarized in the seven topics, and the competence group were asked to pay special attention to whether there were any photos that they had expected to see that were not there. The following “gaps” were identified: photos of social settings, photos of food, photos of animals and photos of other people. The group also drew attention to the lack of photos of the residents’ apartments and of the services provided by the staff (such as meals and other social activities). The photos taken inside the housing facility were exclusively taken from the residents’ apartments but focused on something else than the apartment itself, such as a potted plant, a work of art, or a picture.

Discussion

This study focused on exploring what people living with mental health challenges find meaningful in their everyday life. The use of the photovoice methodology provided access to aspects of everyday life otherwise hidden from us as researchers. The participants' photos visualized meaning in life from inside their homes as well as outdoors during everyday routines. We were invited into a private sphere and shown photos of personal texts, poems and drawings. When the participants talked about the visual data, they told us stories about a longing for past times and past identities, from the times before their mental health problems and hospitalization, as well as stories about striving to establish a meaningful life in recovery. In our experience, the photovoice methodology allowed us to see the small and simple yet meaningful things in people's everyday lives. The first-person visualizing perspective allowed us to focus on and voice these small, easily overlooked things. Things that are easy to overlook are also easy to take for granted if not captured with the first-person gaze, and in our case through the lens of the camera.

Through the collaborative process of analysis, the participants constructed seven topic summaries in their making-meaning of the photos: plants and trees, poems and texts, art, music, going for a walk, esthetics, and public movement. These findings will be discussed in relation to mental health recovery research below in the section "voicing smaller things in relation to grander things." Next, we will discuss the findings in relation to the discussion in the competence group and literature on position and gaze in the section "voicing the expected but absent things from an outside position." Finally, in the section "the strengths and limitations of a photovoice study," we will offer a methodological discussion concerning the use of photovoice versus more traditional research.

Voicing Smaller Things in Relation to Grander Things

Employment (Hansen & Bjerge, 2017) and having a home (Nesse et al., 2020) have been found to be vital for the experience of a meaningful life in recovery processes. In our study, there were no explicit photos of jobs or homes, and none of the topics capture either of these. We thus understand that the participants found meaningfulness in daily life to centre on something other than work and housing. Price-Robertson et al. (2017) refer to work and housing as the stereotypes of meaningful recovery—stereotypes that need to be challenged, which is an important purpose of this paper. Nordaunet and Sælør (2018) describe how recovery happens through both "grand" activities such as employment or education and through interactions in the most ordinary everyday settings. Our findings capture the small, simple things that are meaningful in such settings.

The importance of small things in everyday life to mental health recovery is supported by other photovoice studies (Anderson Clarke & Warner, 2016; Duff, 2012; Piat et al., 2017; Vervliet et al., 2019) and by more traditional studies (Bøe et al., 2019; Borg & Kristiansen 2004; Lindvig et al., 2022; Topor et al., 2018).

Andersen et al. (2003) describe how sources of meaning may vary over time for an individual, pointing to how smaller things might be enough to create meaning at one point in time, while at other times "grander" things (like having a job) might be necessary. Even though our participants depicted what we interpret as small things, they also indirectly depicted the importance of grander things similar to what Cabassa et al. (2013a), in their photovoice study on mental health recovery, call "achievements in life", which help create meaning and purpose in life. In our study, Nabil, who is a musician, took photos of graffiti to symbolize the hip hop culture of which he considers himself to be part. He makes music and dreams of a career as a rap artist. All of our participants talked about achievements both before and after their

hospitalization for mental health care. These achievements including having had ordinary jobs, like Kristin's work in a kindergarten and Eddie's weekly concerts with his band.

Even though none of our participants directly mentioned a place to live as meaningful in their everyday life they indirectly depicted their apartments as context for small meaningful things like Kristin's houseplants, Eddie's poems on his wall, and the trains Ibrahim sees passing from his window. We ask whether having a place to live is more likely to be considered meaningful if one is homeless or has insufficient housing. Davidson et al. (2006, p. 157) write that for people who are struggling to survive the onslaught of their illness, seemingly trivial experiences like being able to turn on and off one's own radio, making drawings or keeping a journal, making a cake from scratch, being able to sit through an entire movie or television show, or being able to get through the grocery store without "freaking out" can provide a sense of mastery. Following this we might say that what people find meaningful depends upon context. In the context of not having a job, smaller things, like going for daily walks, watching television, or listening to music, seem to be of greater importance. Knowing that mental health recovery looks different for different people (Davidson & White, 2007) means acknowledging that some people do not want a job, while others want a place in the ordinary working life (Borg & Kristiansen, 2008).

Our photos, captured by lenses and organized in topics, tell stories of seemingly trivial experiences that are important and meaningful. However, if the importance of these trivial experiences and small things is not voiced, they may be overlooked and taken for granted. If this happens, we may be in danger of validating a person's life as lacking meaning, for example, if the person does not have an everyday ordinary paid job.

Voicing the Expected but Absent Small Things from an Outside Position

Photovoice methodology both conceals and reveals (Wang & Burris, 1997), and several photovoice studies accommodate this by focusing on people, places, events, and objects that are absent from participants' photographs but that might have been expected to feature more prominently (Booth & Booth, 2003; Hodgetts et al., 2007; Purcell, 2009). We tried to focus on what the participants did not choose to photograph by encouraging the members of the competence group to pay special attention to what they didn't see in the displayed photos but would have expected to. We find the rationale for this analytical step in the writings of Milne and Muir (2019), who argue that recognizing absences and what is left "unsaid" is a crucial interpretive and analytical step that is often left out in photovoice studies. They emphasize the need to ask questions to understand not only what has been made visible but also what has been excluded, and why (Milne & Muir, 2019).

The members of the competence group commented on the lack of photos of the participants' apartments and of social activities, which they had expected to see. Some were a little surprised at the lack of importance that the residents seemed to attribute to having an apartment. None of the residents took pictures of staff-supported activities, which suggests that they did not highlight the relationship with the staff when asked to take photos depicting meaningfulness in everyday life. One of the participants mentioned staff-supported activities when talking about the photos but did not depict them in her photos.

In his photovoice study, Purcell (2009) argues that the gaze we adopt influences how we interpret: at home we have a domestic gaze, on holiday we have a tourist gaze, and a social worker looks at a client with a professional gaze. The members of the competence group missed photos of certain things that they assumed that the residents would want to depict to show meaningfulness in their lives. We interpret this as a way of looking at the photos through an outsider's professional gaze; the members of the competence group were expecting to see photos representing the context of the staff/resident relationship, such as photos of the housing

facility, the residents' apartments or activities facilitated by the staff. There seems to be some discrepancy between what the members of the competence group assume to be meaningful for the participants and what the participants themselves find meaningful. While the competence group assumed that the participants would find meaningfulness in grander things (like different dimensions of living at a supported housing facility), they found meaningfulness in smaller things. Several studies have pointed out that when things are seen as insignificant from an outside position it can make a significant difference in an individual's life (Bøe et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2006; Topor et al., 2018).

Tran Smith et al. (2015) argue that an outside position might inherently provide limited opportunity to view seemingly banal objects and settings of great significance to participants. One member of the competence group commented that the participants' photos were "ordinary and impersonal" and "superficial." Another member commented on the lack of variation in the subject matter in the case of one participant who took several photos of the same objects. When viewing Ibrahim's photos of five different trains one competence group member found the photos rather sad. She interpreted the life of this resident as somewhat depressing because he spent so much time just looking out of the window to photograph trains passing by. However, Ibrahim himself understood these photos as representing meaning in his life because they reminded him of past events and things he liked. This underlines the importance of hearing the stories told about the photos to fully grasp the photographer's gaze and the importance of shifting the position of one's own gaze.

Wang and Burris (1997) argue that photovoice can be a means to overcome the problem "that what the professionals and researchers may think is important, may neglect what the participants think is important." If one only looks through the professional gaze, one might misinterpret the inside perspective on recovery and risk overlooking and taking for granted things that are of actual importance to the individual in recovery. The participants in our study stated that different small things were meaningful in their everyday life; they are the kinds of things that may be less visible if people are defined only as "residents at a supported housing facility" with less attention to the fact that people in recovery are recovering socially and relationally in all of life's everyday contexts.

The Strengths and Limitations of a Photovoice Study

For three of our participants, it was crucial for their participation that they were able to use a camera instead of just being interviewed by a researcher. Ibrahim went as far as to say that it was out of the question for him to be interviewed because of his lack of verbal skills. The benefits of the photovoice methodology over more traditional research methods have been argued for in several studies; traditional research methods rely mostly on a person's verbal skills and communicative ability and can be experienced as impersonal and intimidating (Cabassa et al., 2013a). In another study, participants felt more comfortable with photovoice methodology than responding to questionnaires or qualitative interviews (Drainoni et al., 2019). On the contrary, photovoice methodology might favor participants who are comfortable using a camera and those who are good at visualizing.

We found that the use of cameras allowed our participants to "set the stage" for informing us and thus to take an active role in the knowledge generation process (Cabassa et al., 2013a). Mannay (2010, p. 100) writes, "If I had devised an interview schedule the questions would have been constrained by my prior knowledge and the answers in turn would be constrained by these questions." We are in line with both Mannay's findings and Lorenz and Kolb (2009) who found that photos visualized experiential knowledge of daily life which could be transformed into data. Because we are engaging in certain societal discourses about what constitutes a meaningful life, we would most certainly have asked questions about work,

education, and housing if we had designed an interview guide for qualitative interviews with the participants. Giving the participants a camera enabled them to set the stage for the data generated.

By giving participants more agency, the photovoice methodology democratizes knowledge generation (Cabassa et al., 2013b), challenges the traditional “expert” researcher evaluation model (Barry et al., 2021), and provides a mechanism for participants to teach researchers (Lorenzo & Kolb, 2009).

As we were researching meaningfulness, we were pleased to find that the participants described participation in our study as meaningful. Nabil told us how he saw the recruitment poster and wanted to contribute because it felt meaningful, and Kristin summed up her participation as both fun and interesting. Other studies have pointed out that participation in research can be meaningful and give people a feeling of agency and expression (Davidson et al., 2006; Van Steenberghe et al., 2021). Further, participation can be recreational (Anderson Clarke & Warner, 2016) and can provide a sense of purpose in recovery (Quaglietti, 2018).

Hodgetts et al. (2007, p. 273; following Bourdieu, 1990) warn that photos do not provide direct access to everyday life because “what is deemed worthy of photographing is subject to social conventions and norms regarding what is important and acceptable.” One participant in their study declined to take photos of things that he thought were not acceptable, such as drugs and user equipment. We do not know which things our participants decided not to depict, and whether our data consequently might have been different, but it may be regarded as a limitation that we did not ask participants about this.

Although our design was collaborative, co-exploratory and aimed at minimal researcher intervention, “giving voice” has its limitations. Even if we aim to tell the participants’ stories in a straightforward way, we always bring with us all sorts of perspectives, theoretical and otherwise, to our meaning making (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). This paper is thus our interpretation and construction of meaning as visualized and voiced by the participants, even though we have striven to represent them as best we can.

This study had a small number of participants. Greco et al. (2017) found four participants to be a sufficient sample size, saying “despite a relatively small sample size, the qualitative nature of the project allowed for robust and rich data collection with multiple and extensive entries for each participant.” They justify their low number of participants following Creswell (2013), who has identified the need for a minimum of three participants in research using qualitative approaches, which was the number in the photovoice study by Tang et al. (2016).

Not all our participants contributed to the thematic analysis, and this may be regarded as a limitation. Because Nabil was not present to tell us about his photos, they were difficult to understand thus left unanalyzed. This was also the case with three of Eddie’s photos because he left the analysis meeting before we had the chance to look at all of them.

In their photovoice study, Doroud et al. (2022) address the selection of participants and describe how their findings may show overrepresentation of participants who tend to engage with mental health services and group activities. They recommend exploring the experiences of people considered “hard to engage.” In our study, two residents withdrew their participation at an early stage of the data generation, leaving us with residents who usually attend almost all the staff-led activities. If we had engaged the residents that withdrew, or even the four participants that seldom or never participate in staff activities, our data might have been different.

We had an ethical restriction that participants were not allowed to photograph people in such a way that they could be recognized. To try to circumvent this limitation, one participant took pictures of three different people from behind, but unfortunately this did not work because they were all still recognizable. Greco et al. (2017) had a similar restriction in their study and

argue that it might have limited participants in terms of expressing the importance of people in their lives. We strongly support this statement. One way to solve such an ethical restriction concerning photos of people is to provide the participants with written consent forms for people to sign if photographed. Both Tang et al. (2016) and Tran Smith et al. (2015) used this approach, but both found that participants had difficulty obtaining consent. Tran Smith et al. (2015) suggests two interpretations of this: either the participants were uncomfortable asking for signed consent or that they were socially isolated. The latter seemed not to be the case for our participants because even though photos of people were almost absent in our data, all the participants talked about people in their life when showing their photos.

In this study, we offered cameras to people in mental health recovery living in a staff-supported housing facility. The co-exploratory design of our study involving collaboration with both the participants and a competence group resulted in versatile, rich, and nuanced meaning making. The photovoice methodology enabled us to see through the participants' gaze what they viewed as meaningful in their everyday life, which indicates that small things matter as sources of meaning, in this case, plants and trees, poems and texts, art, music, going for a walk, esthetics and public movement. If we continue to neglect what study participants think is important in their everyday life (Wang & Burris, 1997) we risk overlooking these small things and taking them for granted.

The study shows how photovoice can be a useful way to generate knowledge of the first-person recovery perspective on meaning in everyday life, which is valuable for practitioners and researchers. Furthermore, what we learned about the photovoice methodology in this study can be valuable for researchers exploring everyday personal recovery. Finally, the study exemplifies an out-of-the-ordinary, fun, and meaningful way for participants to influence research.

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