



SLI Brain Injury Research Council - Research Brief

Talking with Pictures: Understanding community integration of older adults with acquired brain injury (ABI)

This participatory study explored the community integration of five older adults (age 55+) with ABI (traumatic brain injury, stroke, brain tumor, and guillaine-barre) living in Lexington, MA. Participants used photography and writing to reflect on their lives, experiences, and community, and to communicate their findings. Study photos and exhibits have informed town government decision-making (approval of funding for sidewalk improvement) and raised awareness of ABI in the community.

Background

Older adults with ABI face important disparities related to participation in community life. An understanding of their perspectives on community life participation – their ideas of strengths, challenges, hopes, and community solutions – is vital if health and social services are to be successful at increasing community (re)integration among older adults with physical, cognitive, and communication impairments from ABI. Understanding participant perspectives means using research methods that support personal reflection and communication with others.

Methods

The study method was PhotoVoice, which uses photographs and captions to understand lives, experience, and community. Participants met 12 times (90 minutes per study session) to discuss the research topic, review their photos, write captions, and prepare an exhibit.

Findings

- Participant photos reflected all three themes of community integration: independence, relationships, and meaningful things to do (see Figure 1).
- Some photos reflected more than one theme, e.g. independence and meaningful things to do.
- The PhotoVoice exhibit created greater awareness of the experience of ABI in the community, as exemplified by the comment: “Now I understand better what it is like to be an older person and have a disability from brain injury.”
- Personal as well as environmental supports and barriers to participation were identified (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Community integration as illustrated by study photos

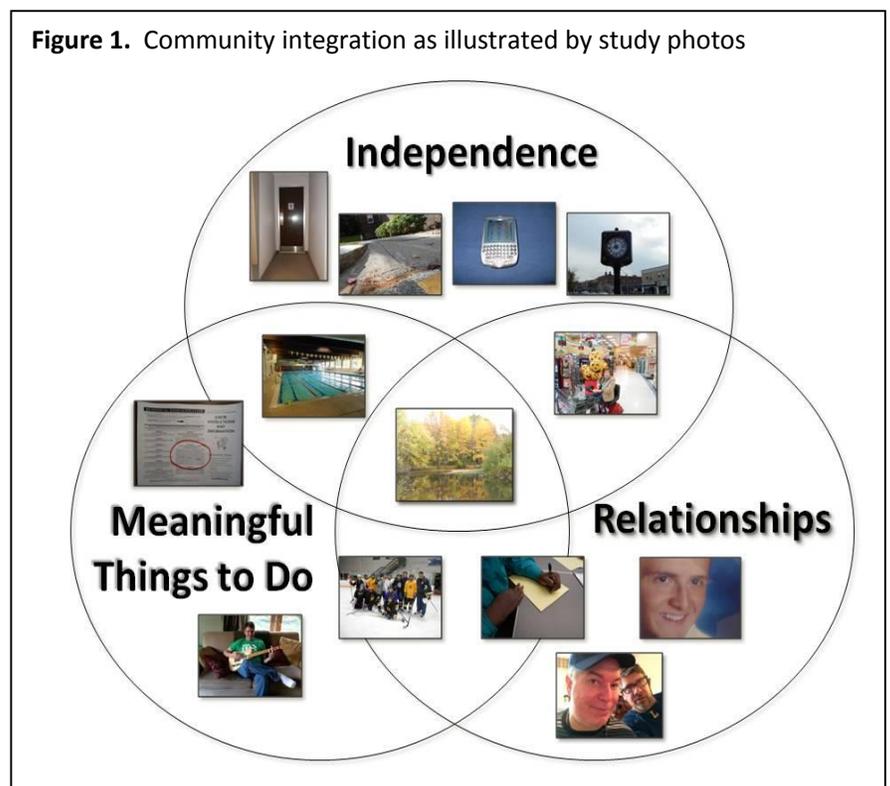


Figure 2. Sample environmental (left) and personal (right) factors impacting community integration that were identified by study participants

Don't roll back...



Imagine walking up this sidewalk alone with a walker. I have to push and hold on, so I don't roll back. Gravity keeps pulling me back. The cement is rough and bumpy. People are helpful when they are around, but I am not always so lucky.

Practice pays off...



My older brother made me practice my penmanship every day. One teacher later thought I must be right-handed because my penmanship was so good. She put my paper on the wall to show that left-handed people could write well too.

Utilization

- **Sidewalk improvement:** Study photos of uneven sidewalks supported ongoing efforts to fund infrastructure improvements in downtown (see Figure 2, "Don't roll back...").
- **Raising awareness:** Study exhibit posters have been displayed at the Lexington public library, the new community center, and at a state health policy forum on the continuum of care for severe ABI.
- **Creating opportunities for meaningful participation in community life:** Study participants presented at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts annual conference (2015) and at a state health policy forum. Positive feedback from audiences fostered a sense of empowerment and purpose.
- **Providing opportunities in future:** In collaboration with SLI's Research Program, Krempels Center in southern New Hampshire is bringing PhotoVoice to their day programming for adults with ABI. Adapting PhotoVoice to brain injury-specific day programs in MA is being explored.

References

Lorenz, LS, Sanders, RR, and O'Neil-Pirozzi, T. (2015). Talking with Pictures: Using PhotoVoice to make a difference for yourself and others. Oral Presentation. 34th Annual Brain Injury Conference, BIA-MA, Marlborough, MA. March 26.

The SLI Brain Injury Research Council is an inter-disciplinary group of researchers and clinicians doing collaborative research to support the physical, cognitive, and social fitness of people with chronic ABI living in the community.

Supportive Living Inc, a non-profit charity, strives to raise the quality of life for survivors of brain injury. To achieve this mission, SLI develops appropriate and affordable supportive housing; provides life-long physical, cognitive, and social fitness through wellness programs; and fosters research aimed at improving the lives of those affected by brain injury.

For more information about this study and SLI's Brain Injury Research and Education Program, contact Laura Lorenz, SLI Director of Research and Education, at llorenz@brandeis.edu.

For more information about Supportive Living and its programs, contact Peter Noonan, Executive Director, at peter.noonan@verizon.net.