

PoupArte

A collaborative programme to empower low-income vulnerable families

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Abstract

Interventions directed towards vulnerable families currently tend to adopt a more collaborative approach in order to increase their effectiveness in improving the well-being of these families. This paper describes the design, pilot-implementation and a preliminary evaluation of PoupArte. This is a collaborative programme, inspired by the Photovoice methodology that aims to support families to recognize and activate their competencies and resources, to overcome their usual lack of confidence and forge a more positive identity, and to stimulate their ability to resolve their own problems. This pilot intervention consisted of ten semi-structured sessions. Five different families and their networks participated. An evaluation, based on the content analysis of photo-assignments, was conducted in order to increase the understanding of families' perspectives of their participation. The main themes addressed in the photographs were: daily celebrations of achievements as well as worries; saving and minimizing expenses; and 'my children'. PoupArte seems to be a flexible, collaborative programme that supports vulnerable families in the process of developing and/or acknowledging their competencies, in particular by providing them with the strength to undertake action.

Keywords: vulnerable families, Photovoice, collaborative approach, social intervention, participatory intervention

Introduction

This paper describes the pilot intervention and preliminary evaluation of the programme 'PoupArte', which was designed to empower and support vulnerable low-income families and was based on the PhV (Photovoice) methodology. The programme was named 'PoupArte' after two Portuguese words: '*poupar*' which means 'to save'; and '*arte*' that means 'art'. The combination of both words underlines the importance of saving (or being adequate financial managers) as an art that can help families.

Vulnerable low-income families have been described as family systems that face a lack of income as well as limited access to material, cultural, and social resources, each of which affects their participation in society (see, for example, Madsen, 2007; Ranzi, 2010; Sousa & Eusébio, 2005). As such, these families experience a circle of disadvantage: as a result of these interrelated difficulties they are exposed to more stressors and, since they have limited/unstable resources to manage them, their vulnerability to stressors increases. Several authors (Krumer-Nevo, 2003; Madsen, 2007; Rojano, 2004; Saleebey, 2001; Sousa, Ribeiro, & Rodrigues, 2006; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2012) have underlined the importance of working with these families in a way that acknowledges their skills and resources, as well as the stressful factors in their lives, instead of primarily focusing the support process on the identification of each existing problem.

Therefore, interventions aimed at these families are undergoing conceptual and practical changes and as a result move away from a traditional approach and towards a collaborative approach (Madsen, 2007, 2009, 2011; Sousa, Ribeiro, & Rodrigues,

2006, 2007; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2012). The *traditional approach* provides solutions to family problems based on professional expertise. The *collaborative approach* incorporates the expertise of both professionals and families as they jointly construct paths for change. In fact, the traditional approach has been shown to be less effective when intervening with low-income vulnerable families (see, for example, Sousa & Rodrigues, 2008). Despite substantial efforts and perseverance of professionals and agencies, families in general do not improve on their vulnerable conditions, generating feelings of frustration and incompetence of those involved (professionals, families, institutions), and lowering expectations of future success. Within the framework of the collaborative approach, both clients and professionals are perceived as experts: the professionals through their ability to help their clients to activate their skills, and the clients through their life experience, needs, and abilities. To intervene collaboratively means: to work in partnership with clients and tailoring or adjusting services to their specific needs; to adopt a stance of cultural curiosity and to honour the clients' knowledge; to focus on desired changes for the future; and to engage in processes of empowerment, assisting clients to experience a sense of agency (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Madsen, 2007, 2009; Monk & Gehart, 2003; Weiss-Gal, Levin, & Krumer-Nevo, 2014). The outcomes of programmes that have applied a collaborative approach in practice, offer evidence of its effectiveness (Rodrigues, Carvalho, & Alarcão, 2009; Saleebey, 2001; Weiss-Gal et al., 2014).

However, the application of the collaborative approach is still limited; incorporation into general support practices is difficult as the surrounding circumstances

(e.g., social policies, beliefs of professionals and clients, as well as most available training programmes) are rooted in the traditional perspective (Grietens, 2010; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2008). In fact, the collaborative approach is primarily a perspective that guides each encounter with clients and requires that both professionals and clients adopt new roles (see, for example, Funnel & Weiss, 2008). Professionals need to give up feeling responsible *for* their clients and become responsible *to* them. The role of clients is to be active partners or collaborators. So, the literature suggests that in order for the collaborative approach to become incorporated into general practice, it will be necessary to apply methods that facilitate this transformation by combining the traditional with the new, and which facilitate a change of perspective (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2012). Therefore, collaborative programmes in several domains of practices have been developed and implemented, such as: training for domestic violence workers (Talavera & Gutiérrez, 2009); support to patients with severe chronic illnesses (Penn, 2001); as a basis for working with refugees and immigrants (DeFehr, Adan, Barros, Rodriguez, & Wai, 2012).

Photovoice methodology

Photovoice (PhV) has emerged as a valuable method in this process of transformation. PhV helps professionals to put into practice the transition towards collaborative practices of work and supports families to shift their position from being characterized by 'helplessness' towards 'empowerment' (Rodrigues, Carvalho, & Alarcão, 2009). PhV has been used mostly to em-

power less-privileged populations, outlined as *community-based participatory research*, since it involves those who are most influenced by a community problem – typically in association with academic researchers to carry out investigations on that situation with the goal of finding better solutions (Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009; Jason, Christopher, Renee, & Davis, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Lopez, Eng, Robinson, & Wang, 2005). In fact, visual methods are increasingly used in social research and intervention, mostly because of a growth of interest in visual culture, but also due to these methods' potential to involve less accessible populations (for example those who are illiterate) in a collaborative way (Jenkins, Woodward, & Winter, 2008).

The PhV method uses photography and voice to access the lives and personal experiences of a community, and to make these accessible to others. Bringing together photos and voice is the key mark of this visual method, which involves providing participants with a photography camera to collect images of their daily lives; supporting them to reflect on these images; and to allow them to talk about these images with influential members of the community. Dating from 1992 and authored by Carolina C. Wang (University of Michigan) and Mary Ann Burris (University of London), the method was developed out of a sequence of projects undertaken in the area of promotion and education for health (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998). Since then, it has been used with several groups in different parts of the world, such as with Chinese women with health issues, homeless people in the USA, and Romany families in Portugal (Hergen-

rather et al., 2009; Rodrigues, Carvalho, & Alarcão, 2009).

The method is founded on three theoretical notions (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997): 1. feminist theory and its contribution to the valorisation of the subjective experience and involvement of communities in decision-making; 2. Paulo Freire's notion of "education for a critical consciousness", which stimulates dialogue and the exchange of personal experiences in the search for paths to change; 3. and photographic documentary, as an unequalled means of visual expression of social consciousness.

PhV follows four fundamental principles: 1. image educates; 2. each person is an expert in their own life; 3. policy makers ought to listen to and include the populations under concern in the development of measures which affect them; and 4. intervention should be positive and effective in collecting and revealing competences (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). PhV and the use it makes of image (photo) and voice stimulates reflection and helps develop abstract/symbolic thinking. The method offers a practice which induces reflective capacities in that it solicits a concrete representation of an idea, a concept or an intention. The adoption of photographs overcomes the exclusivity of verbal interaction, at the same time as it promotes debate based on concrete images. PhV's main advantage is its adaptability to different objectives, topics, groups, and communities. The method transforms personal images into a collaborative process of information collection and analysis. Through this process it allows for research and action (intervention) to take place, even with those persons who generally experience difficulties in expressing themselves, thus validating their experiences and including them in the process of

action and research (*community-based participatory research and action*). At the same time, it promotes empowerment and the engagement of the participants in the planning of policies, distancing them from the role of recipient of support.

The limitations of the method concern the diversity of material involved and the associated costs (photography cameras, printing, audio-visual devices, dissemination). It also requires the development of human resources and usually an after-work time schedule (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997).

Aim

The PoupArte project focuses on improving the management of financial and material resources of families living on the threshold of survival. The specific objectives of PoupArte are to support these families to recognize and activate their competencies and resources, to overcome their general lack of confidence and forge a more positive identity, and to stimulate their ability to seek solutions to their own problems. This paper describes the PoupArte stages of planning, implementation and evaluation.

PoupArte

PoupArte followed the PhV methodology and comprised three phases: 1. preparation (setting and materials; staff; recruitment; participants), 2. action (multi-family group sessions), and 3. finalisation (evaluation) (Rodrigues, Carvalho, & Alarcão, 2008; Wang et al., 1998).

Preparation

Setting and materials. The programme was carried out over a ten months period. The activities took place at a facility of the University of Aveiro. This facility was located in the city centre (an easy accessible and well-known area) and provided a setting unaccompanied by the particular atmosphere that generally surrounds traditional settings of interventions. In addition, we expected the university setting to generate greater expectations since it is an environment associated with development and learning. The facility offered three adjacent rooms which were used for multi-family group sessions, children's activities, and snack time. In order to ensure and facilitate families' continued participation with the programme, we provided a set of free services: transportation between their homes and the university by private bus (provided by the City Hall of Aveiro); food and refreshments at the end of each session (donated by local bakeries and the Social Services of the University of Aveiro); and a free child minding programme during the time parents participated in the sessions (organised by a team of volunteers from Origami, a sector of the Students Association of the University of Aveiro). During the PoupArte intervention we made use of digital photography cameras (one for each family and one for the team of volunteers); a video camera to record the group sessions; a laptop computer and a data-show projector to exhibit photos during sessions; a printer and paper to print the photos; miscellaneous stationery for each participant (e.g., envelopes and/or a folder to store the photos and a calendar with session dates; material for the preparation of the final photography exhibition; material for the activities of

the children; a telephone line for contacts between participants and the facilitators).

Staff. The PoupArte staff included teams of facilitators, volunteers, and supervisors. The team of facilitators included a female psychologist (1st author) and a male nurse. The team members combined their expertise on family interventions with vulnerable populations and knowledge of group dynamics. The facilitators aimed to stimulate group reflections by posing questions, and to elicit deeper thought processes by modelling an inquisitive attitude and approach, by showing interest in each participant's story, and by encouraging equal contribution of participants (Rodrigues, Carvalhal, & Alarcão, 2009). The facilitators supervised the volunteer team, and in turn were supervised by the senior researchers. The volunteer team included a coordinator (a female psychologist) plus eight female members, all students at the University of Aveiro (between 19 to 34 years of age). The volunteers developed and implemented the child programme activities; they accompanied the families during transportation (preparing arrival and departure); and prepared the snacks. The volunteers received two pre-intervention training sessions by the first author, reflecting on the principles of volunteering, explaining PoupArte's goals and methods, and developing their role in the project. During the intervention, regular meetings between volunteers and facilitators took place to reflect on what was being done and to implement necessary adjustments. The supervision team was formed by two female, senior researchers (both psychologists; 2nd and 3rd author) who assisted and supported the facilitators when necessary by discussing methodological or ethical issues arising from the ongoing sessions. One of the supervisors

participated in three sessions, and as such contributed to reducing the distance that traditionally exists between academics and vulnerable populations.

Recruitment. To ensure that the participants were low-income, vulnerable families, the following inclusion criteria were set:

- the family should be long-term recipients (>3 years) of SII (social inclusion income; Baptista & Cabrita, 2009);
- experience persisting low-income conditions and other vulnerable conditions;
- at least one member per family should be available to attend sessions regularly.

Individuals suffering from severe mental illnesses, psychiatric problems, or addictions (alcoholism or drug abuse) were not included in the programme. The director of the Regional Centre of Social Security of Aveiro was contacted to obtain authorisation for the study.

The director assigned three SII case managers (one female, age 32, five years of professional experience; one female, age 34, six years of professional experience; one male, age 36, 11 years of professional experience) to mediate between the researchers and potential participants. These case managers were contacted and the project's objectives, method, and required collaboration were explained; all agreed to collaborate.

The professionals then contacted nine families who met the inclusion criteria and obtained consent from the families to be contacted by the researcher. A meeting was scheduled between the researcher (1st author) and each of the families, at a location that suited the families (three took place at social services agencies and six at the homes of the families). During these meetings the objectives and methodology of the study were described and it was explained what

their participation would involve. Four families immediately agreed to participate; the five families that were hesitant were given time to decide, and a follow-up telephone call was scheduled. After these calls two additional families agreed to participate. Three families declined due to lack of time; for these families the involvement with the programme ended there.

Before the PoupArte sessions commenced, the facilitator (1st author) visited each of the families twice at their homes. The aim of these initial meetings was to start building a *rappart* with the families. During these meetings further information concerning their participation was provided; questions or possible doubts were discussed; and organisational details were explained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, explicitly addressing their authorisation to video record the PoupArte sessions. After consent was provided, socio-demographic data were obtained regarding household composition, age, gender, marital status, educational level and employment status for each family member, complemented by household income and source(s) of income.

Participants. Initially, eight members from six families participated. However, after the fifth session, one female, representing one family, dropped out because she found a job and was therefore unable to attend the sessions. As a result, the final PoupArte group comprised seven participants from five families¹: one family (Azinheira) represented by three members (both parents and one adult daughter); and four families (Figueira, Pinheiro, Carvalho, Sobreiro) represented by one family member (in all cases the mother),

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1 All names are fictitious.

mostly due to work commitments of other family members (who have full-time jobs). Participants brought other relatives to three of the PoupArte sessions: two adult daughters participated in two sessions and a husband, a brother and a cousin each came to one session.

Participants' age ranged between 21 to 47 years. Four participants were married, two were living together, and one was separated from her spouse. Household composition was as follows: three families were living in a three-generation households (between six and eight members in each family); one single mother living with three dependent children; and one adult couple living with four dependent children. Two participants had received no formal education and were illiterate; the other five participants had experienced two to six years of schooling. Three participants were unemployed, three described themselves as housewives, and one had a part-time job. All families combined different income sources; mostly, low salaries from some family members were supplemented by SII and other social benefits (such as for education, housing, or health).

Action

PoupArte was designed as a semi-structured programme of nine intervention sessions with a multi-family group and one session with the families and an audience; each session lasted between 90 and 110 minutes. Sessions were intentionally kept brief, in order to maintain the level of engagement from the participants and to keep them from 'tiring' from the programme. The first five sessions took place during five consecutive weeks, in order to

generate closeness and engage participants; the following five sessions took place every other week, in order to give participants more time to complete the tasks (once they had taken on board the methodology of the programme). During the intervals between sessions, facilitators made individual contact (face-to-face and/or by phone) in order to check on the progress with the photography assignments, to clarify assignments, to address insecurities with the assignments, and to maintain participants' involvement with the programme.

The sessions were planned according to PhV's methodology of photography assignments, which required participants to take photographs on a particular theme. During the fourth session, families expressed their interest in focusing on two issues that had not been scheduled: "How my family spends good times" and "Difficulties and barriers faced when seeking for help/support". Both topics were incorporated, in accordance with the collaborative nature of the programme (see Table 1). The first topic was added as a regular photo assignment task; the second was also added as a photo assignment task, but an experienced social worker was invited to reflect on this assignment with the participants and to address any difficulties they experienced. For a further explanation of the programme; see the *Appendix*.

Finalisation

The main goal of the evaluation was to increase the understanding of how families perceived their participation, as this would contribute to deepen the understanding of how the collaborative approach used in the PoupArte programme empowered vulnerable, low-income families. The evaluation

Table 1. PoupArte sessions

Session	Main goal	Short description
1	Training	Brief presentation of the project, participants, and staff Introduction to <i>PhV</i> Instruction and handing over of cameras (introduction) Introduction to the first topic to be photographed: "My family"
2	Ditto	Clarification and answering of questions regarding the methodology Presentation and discussion of the photographs from the first topic assignment Continued instruction regarding the use of the cameras Presentation of next photo assignment: "Positive and negative moments during the week"
3	Photo-sharing	Brief review of facilitating factors and barriers to completing the photo assignments Presentation and discussion of the photographs from the previous topic Presentation of next photo assignment: "How do we spend our money during a week"
4	Ditto	Presentation and discussion of the photographs from the previous topic Presentation of next photo assignment: "Strategies we use to manage with the money we have"
5	Ditto	Presentation and discussion of the photographs from the previous topic Preparation of next session: formulation of participants' questions for the invited social worker Presentation of next photo assignment (for session 7): "Difficulties and barriers faced when seeking for help/support"
6	Ditto	Presentation and discussion of the photographs from the previous topic Social worker guest participation to answer participants questions Presentation of next photo assignment: "How my family spends good times"
7	Ditto	Presentation and discussion of two previous photo assignments Presentation of next photo assignment: "How to improve the support provided to families"
8	Preparing for an audience	Presentation and discussion of the photographs on the previous topic Identification and selection of the audience
9	Ditto	Preparation for the public presentation and exhibition
10	Audience and photo-exhibition	Final public presentation of the results and a photo exhibition Celebrating the completion of the programme Returning the photography cameras

process involved an analysis of PoupArte participant's photographs, of their accounts of the photo assignments themes, and of their answers to the question: How would you explain to others what you are doing in PoupArte?

Photo assignments analysis. Following a process of content analysis (Heath & Luff, 2008), photographs presented by the participants throughout the sessions were descriptively categorized and analysed as manifest content; the transcribed accounts offered by participants for each photo were analysed as latent content. The data analysis was conducted independently by the 1st author and by a social worker (not involved in the intervention, who was unaware of the aims and method of the programme), using the software WebQDA (2011).

The analysis started by detailing the frequency of photos per session, per photo assignment theme, and per participant/family; then each photo was matched with the respective transcript. Next, each coder independently studied the photographs and read the session transcripts to extract relevant information, and started an open coding to condense the data into themes. Then, both coders met to compare their analysis, and worked together until they agreed on a list of themes.

Next, the two coders independently classified each photograph and corresponding transcript within the selected themes and they met to analyse their (dis)agreements. The inter-coder agreement (reached by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements) was 89.6%, representing good reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Finally, the two coders discussed their disagreements and consensus was reached in all cases. The main themes emerging

from the analysis were (Table 2): daily rejoicings and worries; saving and minimizing expenses; my children; my family and friends; facing bureaucracy; and performing household tasks.

Final question. "How would you explain to others what you are doing in PoupArte?". This question was asked in a follow-up session, three months after the final session with the audience, during an individual interview with each of the five families (six participants; the mother in the family Carvalho was ill). The responses (Table 3) addressed themes of learning, thinking of solutions to problems, caring for themselves, and talking. Participants also felt they had socialized and made new friends.

Discussion

This paper described the pilot-implementation and preliminary evaluation of PoupArte, a collaborative programme designed to empower vulnerable, low-income families. The evaluation focused on the families' perception of their participation, since this would provide a deeper understanding of the contribution of a collaborative approach such as PoupArte, to empower the participants' position in life. Participants were not involved in the data analysis since we were looking for an external perspective. For a future project considering a *community-based participatory approach*, an analysis involving the participants could be complementary.

The analysis of the photo assignment provided information on participants' perspectives on their daily experiences in life. Three main themes emerged: daily rejoicings and worries, saving and minimizing expenses

Table 2. Content analysis of photo assignments

Theme	Photos (N=175)	Description
Daily rejoicings and worries	62	Includes: i) happy moments among the family, such as: laughing, playing cards, watching TV, taking photographs, celebrating birthdays, dating, participating in festivals, attending traditional free events, participating in PoupArte; ii) bad moments in the family, such as a storm caused the roof to collapse, health issues among family members, expensive medicines.
Saving and minimizing expenses	49	Includes: i) strategies to reduce spending on food (e.g., cheap shopping in supermarkets, buying in bulk, using left-overs to make a meal); ii) growing foods in order to have good products and save money; iii) and several strategies to minimize expenses, such as washing clothes by hand, bathing with cold water.
My children	35	Children were photographed in several contexts: with relatives (e.g., grandparents), playing at home and in public parks, with the parents (e.g., playing, going to school).
My family and friends	11	Portraits of family members (e.g., husband, nephew, sister, cousin), close friends and pets.
Facing bureaucracy	11	Photographs of various documents and letters from the social services that demonstrated the great bureaucracy involved and the difficulties the participants faced in dealing with and comprehending the information.
Performing household tasks	7	Participants photographed themselves and other family member performing ordinary household tasks (e.g., cooking, ironing).

es, and my children. The theme of *daily rejoicings and worries* shows the reoccurring *ups* (such as family celebrations) and *downs* (for instance, developing some illnesses) of daily life, illustrating what the literature describes as the successive crises pattern (Grietens, 2010; Madsen, 2007; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002). Another theme was *saving and minimizing expenses*, which constitutes a regular concern for these families that face severe financial restrictions. This theme is closely linked to the previous one (*daily rejoicings and worries*), since any change to the routine or any unexpected needs (even small ones, such as buying medicine for headache) almost always leads to deprivation in other key

areas of basic living, such as food or hot water for the bath (see, for example, Despard, Chowa, & Hart, 2011; Rodrigues, Sousa, & Alarcão, 2015; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2012). PoupArte intentionally focused on financial management in vulnerable, low-income families, as this topic is a main concern within these families and constitutes a particularly challenging topic for social service providers (Rodrigues, Sousa, & Alarcão, 2015). Given the themes that participants used to describe their daily live experiences (e.g., living with constant ups and downs that affect the available material resources while struggling to procure basic goods to meet the needs of their family members; see for instance

Table 3. Participants' accounts on their PoupArte experience

Participants	How would you explain to others what you are doing in PoupArte?
Figueira	<i>"Learning to find new solutions to problems that exist in our lives. And maybe making a better plan for our life...better planning of things!"</i>
Sobreiro	<i>"We learned to speak! We learned different things, things we didn't know. We learned how we should take care of ourselves."</i>
Pinheiro	<i>"We learned things, how we could become better informed ... You gave us, more or less, a few good suggestions and you're fighting to help us resolve the problems".</i>
Carvalho (father)	<i>"I used to go out very rarely ...! It's the hospitality, to be with people we didn't use to know!"</i>
Carvalho (daughter)	<i>"Oh, so much stuff I have to say. Knowing for certain and having clear information, hospitality ... It was all a way of having a new experience. Even when it comes to friendship! And yes, we could grow, and think about what could be done".</i>
Azinheira	<i>"How am I going to explain?!... I don't know! We learned to speak better! We didn't know how to speak, say the things, and talk with others! How should we... work?! How should we, for example, ask for help? And many other things..."</i>

Ranzi, 2010), this focus proved appropriate. Some of these families' strategies in terms of financial management are commonly perceived as 'poor practices' by professionals and by society in general (Rodrigues, Sousa, & Alarcão, 2015). However, during PoupArte sessions the participants stated that mostly their decisions were calculated and based on previous experiences; for instance, participants reported that when they have money, they immediately buy basic goods (mostly food); this means that if they earn more money in a certain period, they will buy more goods as an assurance of their subsistence for a longer period of time, instead of just saving the money. The rationale is that *to buy is to have*, which seems to indicate a clear perception of the successive crises pattern they experience and a lack of control they feel over their life circumstances. In particular, the participants reported that ensuring food for their children is a major priority. So, the theme *my children* is of great relevance in photos; participants reported that raising children with limited resources

is a big challenge and cause constant worry. Also, families wanted to show (through the pictures) that they provide happy moments and experiences for their children, and that they enjoy spending time together.

The themes emerging from the photo assignments bring into view these families' competencies. The assignments help to support families to recognize and activate their own competencies, and also can support professionals to acknowledge these families' strengths. These families showed resilience; they were able to manage and adapt to instability and constant crises, they were capable of managing limited material resources with creativity and able to set priorities (children are the main priority, both in terms of assuring material and emotional needs).

When asked how they would explain to others their experience in PoupArte, participants emphasized the *learning experience* it offered them. PoupArte sessions take place with non-hierarchical groups and every person's voice is of equal importance.

Participants and facilitators discuss *generative* themes which have significance within the context of their lives (Freire, 1988). It seemed that PoupArte awakened the consciousness of the learner (Freire, 1988); a process that, for families struggling with poverty, does not (often) occur naturally. In fact, the conditions needed to be actively created and PoupArte seemed to have managed this mainly by adopting PhV which is an instrument to stimulate reflection, dialogue, and action in families (Lopez et al., 2005; Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008). The image (photo) and voice/word (dialogue) are complementary: sometimes photos offered the theme for a group dialogue (for instance, when two participants did not photograph negative moments, but shared their worries within the group after seeing the pictures of others); in other instances, participants started talking about an issue and later captured a representative image of it.

In addition, PoupArte was planned in a semi-structured (flexible) way, allowing the project to adapt to and as such to respect the families' personal learning rhythm (for instance, some participants were able to take pictures by themselves from the beginning, others never shot them by themselves and preferred to receive help from family members), and to incorporate participants' suggestions for topics, thereby placing them in the role of experts in their life stories.

Also, facilitators need to be trained in order to be able to empower participants, since empowerment is not a technique or strategy, but rather a vision that guides each encounter (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2012). The respondents' focus on learning might indicate that families are overcoming, or at least, starting to overcome their usual lack of confidence and to forge a more positive

identity. This is supported by the initiative taken by the families in the middle of the programme, when they suggested two new topics: 1) difficulties and barriers faced when seeking for help/support, and 2) how my family spends good times. These topics showed parts of their lives that usually are not considered by professionals (the good things; and the difficulties in dealing with formal support). This seems to show that a *trusting relationship* was emerging within the group (involving participants/families and facilitators), and family members were gaining in confidence. In particular, showing 'positive moments' seemed to reveal the family members' need to state that their lives involve more than just their problems; they also have a more positive image of themselves and they trust the group enough to share that aspect of their life with each other. Taking initiative and making suggestions seemed to be a first step in stimulating them to seek solutions for their own problems, and since they felt they had learned several useful skills, they could move into action (for instance, around six months after the end of the sessions, the family Sobreiro phoned the facilitators saying how happy they were because, after independently making several applications, they got help from a dentist who was going to take care of a child's dental problems at low cost and by instalments).

Conclusions

PoupArte was designed to put the collaborative approach into practice. The programme, which is based on the PhV methodology, showed that families became highly involved in the process of taking photos, talking,

and learning. The PoupArte programme seemed to support the creation of a collaborative context during the process of working with vulnerable low-income families, as it attempted to meet their unique abilities, respecting (but challenging) each family's learning rhythm, and incorporating initiatives of the families into the programme.

Some of the main *lessons learned* are: that the main topic of the programme must be relevant for families (PoupArte therefore focused on financial management); that these topics should be addressed in a non-intrusive way, and considered as part of families' overall life (all aspect of life are interrelated in daily life); that even if just one member of the family participates in the sessions, all family members (and even members of informal network) become involved through the photo assignment tasks; that it is highly important to respect the personal pace of each participant's learning process and of the development of their engagement (for example, what and when they want to share); that the programme design needs to be flexible in order to match the families' rhythms and to be able to incorporate their suggestions; and that it is important to make the participants co-owners of the

processes and the programme (for example by providing a photography camera to participants they immediately experienced both a responsibility and power of choice over the content they could explore during the sessions).

As such, PoupArte appears to be a collaborative programme that supports vulnerable families in developing and/or acknowledging their competencies, in particular providing them with the strength to undertake action.

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Appendix

Explanation of the ten PoupArte sessions

Session 1. This session started with the brief presentation of the staff, participants, and the programme. PhV methodology was introduced and one digital photography camera was provided to each family. All participants were encouraged to explore and experiment with the camera and photos. The facilitators provided participants with information on basic photography techniques (e.g., positioning in relation to light sources, movement, framing, use of flash, lighting) that would assist them to present their experiences in the best possible way. Some group rules were explicitly discussed, such as expected commitment and punctuality, no mobile phone use during the sessions, confidentiality of the personal information learned during the sessions, respectfulness towards each other. The session ended with the presentation of the first photo assignment: *My family*. The intention behind this task (Rodrigues, Carvalho, & Alarcão, 2009) was to get to know the participating families; to encourage the indirect involvement of the family members who were not attending the sessions; to provide these families with the, often rare, opportunity to photograph their family members; and to assess their photographic competencies outside of the instruction context.

Session 2. This session began with a review of the methodology, in particular the PhV process and the key role of participants. Afterwards each participant received a closed envelope containing prints of their photographs on the topic of *My family*. The session continued with the presentation of the pho-

tos. Facilitators modelled and encouraged detailed analyses of the photos in order to help the participants to become aware that images can be informative and explored by others, to point out creativity and to clarify issues regarding the use of cameras. By the end of the session, the facilitators presented the next photo assignment: *Positive and negative moments during the week*.

Sessions 3 to 7. The organisation of these five sessions was similar. Each began with an informal conversation about the time between sessions and about the photo assignment. Next, each participant received his/her own photographs and looked at those of the other group members. These were particularly dynamic moments during the sessions, as everyone showed great enthusiasm or disappointment with the results of their photos. Disappointments followed the poor quality of some images, which was attributed to the characteristics of the cameras. Then, each participant selected the photograph which s/he felt to best capture the photo assignment topic and explained what had led them to capture that particular image.

In session 5, the group began by preparing for the following session during which a social worker would be present to provide further information on aspects of formal social support, a topic suggested by the participants. Facilitators assisted the participants in their choice and formulation of questions. During session 6, the social worker (female, age 36, 12 years of professional experience at the Social Department of the Aveiro City Hall) was present. The session began with a brief presentation by the social worker on formal social support available for families from the local government. Each participant posed the question they had prepared, followed by

an answer-to-question dialogue between the social worker and participant. Participants voiced their problems and insecurities and took notes on the social worker's recommendations and suggestions; for those who were unable to write, the social worker was available for a personal follow-up session.

Sessions 8 and 9. These sessions were dedicated to preparation of their work for a presentation and a PhV exhibition for an invited audience. It was decided that two sessions would be necessary to arrange the logistics (e.g., setting, invitations), and to select the photos and the most relevant ideas that would be part of the presentation. Participants selected those photographs they felt to best represent their experiences and which they wished to exhibit; they titled each photo and briefly sorted through the data from the discussion about the photo. The audience was invited by invitation card and/or through personal contact; the invitation offered overall information about the programme and explained its objectives. The selection of the audience was based on their perceived ability to follow the ideas generated through the programme and their expected ability and willingness to implement the suggestions brought forward by the group. Therefore, the families' case managers and other community professionals (from town council services and government agencies and departments) were invited. Participants also invited family members and close friends they would feel supported by during the public presentation.

Session 10. A key objective of the PhV methodology is to inform and reach community agents as a way to engage participants in efforts to influence policies that affect their lives (Wang et al., 1998). The final session took place at an auditorium at the University of Aveiro. The session started with a brief presentation of PoupArte, made by one of the facilitators (1st author), and was followed by the official opening of the PoupArte Exhibition. Afterwards, the PhV exhibition remained open to the public for the duration of six months. There was an audience of 73 people during this final session. About 50 members of the audience were family members and close friends of the participants, the remaining were professionals and representatives of the main social services in the community. The exhibited photographs had been enlarged and mounted on plaques by PoupArte staff. Participants chose to focus on four main ideas that in their view would improve the support provided to families living under vulnerable conditions: 1. creation of a one-stop shop that assesses and prioritises needs and makes the referrals to appropriate services; 2. increased information sharing between the case manager and other professionals (faster support); 3. installation of mediators (political and social agents) who arrange for different kinds of support (e.g., financial, material) among local companies; 4. creation of a centre where second hand goods and materials may be collected and distributed (e.g., furniture and appliances) to those in need. During the opening the participants presented their work and answered the questions from members of the audience.