Photo-elicitation interviewing with young adults – what does it tell us about insight, power, bias and skill?

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Abstract

Purpose: Claims that visual methods generate novel insight and redistribute research power are critiqued with reference to a photo-elicitation study with young adults. The paper also examines the argument that visual methods promote irrelevance or bias in the data, and that they necessitate a particular skill on the part of both the researcher and the researched.

Background: The semi-structured interview has become a bedrock of qualitative methodologies and has been both celebrated and critiqued. It has also spurned a range of associated creative methodologies seeking to extend the nature, richness and usefulness of qualitative data. Photo-elicitation is one such creative method which is reported to invite new possibilities, new ways of relating, and new types of data into the interview arena. The present study utilised photo-elicitation alongside a timeline approach to generate young adults' accounts of their 'quarterlife crisis'. The study aimed to identify the forms which the 'quarterlife crisis' may take across two cultures.

Methods: Two weeks before a research interview, participants (n=14 UK; N=8 Indian) were tasked with taking/collecting photographs that were significant and relevant to the crisis. Task instructions were provided and participants were allowed to take/collect any photos associated with the topic as long with only a few prohibitions. While the timeline represented the life trajectory as marked by the participants during the interview, photos were used to represent different parts in the timeline, giving a further visual illustration of experiences in the respective parts of the timeline.

Conclusions: It is argued that photo-elicitation can support the capturing and representation of experience for research purposes, and can constitute a shared platform to explore the psychological, emotional and contextual elements of experiences, beyond what may have been originally anticipated by participants. Participants have at their discretion the ability to create a particular context surrounding the 'reality' of the picture, and they were able to talk extensively about each image and its assigned meaning. Some participants reported gaining new insights and perspectives through the photo-elicitation interview itself, above and beyond what they had thought about pre-interview. However, there is a risk that in collating images for the task, participants re-engage with snapshots (indeed a form of verification) of the past whose meaning may be less negotiable or subject to re-interpretation than one's memories; the ethics of this should be explored more fully in photo-elicitation work. In terms of power, the method was experienced by both researcher and researched as participant-led, and appeared to subvert the standard question-answer format and (possibly power differentials) of standard interviews. There is a demand for skills on the part of the researcher in order to avoid automatic construction of meanings from photographs and participants themselves reported feeling that the task required skill, or cleverness. There is a risk that photo-elicitation

participants attempt to 'get it right' for the researcher in ways that talk-only interview may not.